RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY IN TUNISIA

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“Religious Authority in Tunisia”

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Introduction

In August 2017, Tunisian President Beji Caid Essebsi proposed to grant equal inheritance rights to men and women, revising the existing code that relegated women to half the share of men. This proposal was supported by Tunisia’s grand mufti, who argued that equal inheritance “consolidates the place of women and eliminates discrimination between the two sexes.” However, other religious actors, including the Islamist political party Ennahdha and the clerics of Egypt’s Al-Azhar University, condemned the proposed reform as a violation of Quranic precepts.

In applying religious texts to current political issues, disagreements in interpretation are inevitable. But during such disagreements, which interpretation is more credible? Who do Tunisians trust to explain what Islam prescribes? In other words, who speaks for Islam in Tunisia?

Our survey of 800 Tunisians, conducted by YouGov in December 2017, enables us to answer these questions in two ways. First, the survey presented respondents with a pre-selected list of 13 religious authorities, seven Tunisian and six foreign, and asked them directly who they approved of and trusted as religious authorities. These direct questions, however, may also be limited by social desirability bias: respondents may not be willing to openly express their support for extremist religious figures such as Salafi or jihadi leaders.

We therefore also implemented a new, indirect method of measuring support: endorsement experiments. Rather than ask directly about one’s support for an individual, we instead asked for respondents’ level of support for statements randomly attributed to the same religious authorities. We were then able to assess the effect of an individual’s endorsement, providing a measure of their sway, or authority, over the respondents.

Each of these methods produced slightly different results. First, figures associated with Islamist political parties, such as Tunisia’s Ennahdha, perform well in terms of general approval, in line with their political and electoral success. However, they perform poorly when evaluated specifically as religious authorities, nor are they able to sway respondents’ opinions on the endorsement questions, all of which deal with interpretations of religious matters. In other words, figures like Ennahdha’s Rachid Ghannouchi may enjoy support as political actors, but not necessarily as religious authorities.

A second important finding concerns Tunisia’s state religious authorities, including the grand mufti and the grand imam of Al-Zaytuna Mosque. While state authorities are commonly perceived as coopted by their governments and therefore not viewed as credible religious actors, our data suggest otherwise. Though they do not enjoy strong approval in general, the grand mufti and grand imam are among those most trusted as religious authorities.

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religious authorities. Moreover, they produced some of the few positive and statistically significant endorsement effects: support for a religious interpretation increased by an average of 5 percent when endorsed by these state authorities, and up to 18 percent on some questions. While not a large effect, they avoided the null or often negative effects engendered by an endorsement from almost all other figures.

An equally surprising but more troubling finding concerns Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of the Islamic State (IS). While few stated their support for Baghdadi in direct questions, he emerges as the most popular figure in the endorsement experiments. An endorsement by Baghdadi increased support for a religious interpretation by about 10 percent, double that of the state religious authorities, and up to 16 percent on some questions. These results corroborate Tunisia’s emergence as one of the largest sources of foreign fighters for IS, and suggest that the number of IS fighters from Tunisia may not simply reflect residents’ greater freedom of movement but rather genuine support for Baghdadi.

The survey results also indicate that Tunisians support jihadists abroad, but not at home. Abu Iyadh, the leader of Tunisia’s Ansar al-Sharia militia group, and hard-line Salafi Sheikh Khatib al-Idrissi saw the lowest levels of support in all of the questions, even in the indirect endorsement experiments. While Tunisia may send thousands of fighters abroad, there appears to be very little support for violent or extremist figures back home.

In sum, the answer to the question of who speaks for Islam in Tunisia is fairly surprising. While Ennahdha may dominate the political scene, matters of religion appear to be swayed more by state religious authorities and, more troublingly, by the Islamic State. These results suggest that in Tunisia’s current religious debate over equal inheritance, an endorsement by the grand mufti could actually play an important role in shaping public opinion.

Survey

In order to examine the nature of religious authority and attitudes toward religious and religiously oriented leaders in the Middle East, the author and a team of researchers worked with the global polling firm YouGov to conduct an online public opinion survey in 12 countries across the region in December 2017. As an online survey, the YouGov sample is not representative at the national level: the respondents are disproportionately male, educated, and urban. However, the survey is representative in regard to various indicators of religiosity, which is one of the most important characteristics in our study of religious authority, in addition to indicators such as employment and marital status. For a discussion of the demographics of the survey sample and the advantages and disadvantages associated with this sample, see the Survey Appendix (http://bit.ly/2TNDpdP). This report presents the findings from the survey data collected from Tunisia, which included 792 respondents.

Table 1 provides descriptive statistics of the survey sample, comparing it to Tunisia’s 2014 census and to the 2016 Arab Barometer survey. As an online survey, the YouGov sample is not nationally representative. The sample is significantly more likely to be male, educated, and from Tunis. However, the sample is representative in terms of level of unemployment,
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marital status, and support for democracy. Moreover, the survey is representative in terms of religiosity: respondents in the survey sample are just as likely as those in nationally representative samples to say they pray daily and read/listen to the Quran daily, and about twice as likely to say they want to see clerical influence over political matters. In short, while not nationally representative on all characteristics, the survey sample is representative on one of the most important characteristics of our study on religious authority.

Table 1. Representativeness of Survey Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statistic</th>
<th>YouGov Survey</th>
<th>2014 Census</th>
<th>2016 Arab Barometer</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>38.1</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tunis</td>
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<td>9.6</td>
<td>10.2</td>
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<td>18.1</td>
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<td>15.3</td>
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<td>Pro-Democracy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Clerical Influence</td>
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<td>-</td>
<td>21.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Religious Authorities

The survey included a pre-selected list of 13 religious actors. The first seven were transnational names, used in all of the country surveys for the larger project on religious authority in the Middle East, while the last six were tested exclusively in Tunisia and selected based on case knowledge. Among these country-specific names, we sought to include the most popular of each “type” of religious actor: state authorities, mainstream Islamist parties, Salafis, Sufis, and jihadists.

1. Rachid Ghannouchi, founder of Tunisia’s Ennahdha Party
2. Recep Tayyip Erdogan, president of Turkey and leader, Justice and Development Party
3. Amr Khaled, Egyptian TV preacher
4. Ahmed El Tayeb, grand imam of Al-Azhar University in Egypt
5. Hassan Nasrallah, secretary general of Lebanon’s Hezbollah
6. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, leader of the Islamic State
7. Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, Islamic scholar
8. Habib Ellouze, Ennahdha sheikh
9. Othman Battikh, grand mufti of Tunisia
10. Hussein al-Obeidi, grand imam of Al-Zaytuna Mosque
11. Abu Iyadh al-Tunisi, leader of Ansar al-Sharia
12. Khatib al-Idrissi, Salafi sheikh
13. Mazen Cherif, Sufi sheikh

In the Arab Barometer, the question is phrased as clerical influence explicitly over governmental decisions, which may explain this discrepancy.
Included among the transnational names was Sheikh Rachid Ghannouchi, the co-founder and president of Tunisia’s Ennahda (Renaissance) Party. Ennahda has been the primary Islamist political party in Tunisia. Repressed under the regime of former dictator Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali (1987-2011), Ennahda has become a dominant political player after the 2011 revolution. Ennahda won the 2011 elections with 37 percent of the vote, heading a coalition government that ruled until 2014. In the 2014 elections, Ennahda placed second with 28 percent of the vote, and joined a coalition government led by the Nidaa Tounes Party.

Since 2011, Ennahda has moved steadily toward the center of the political spectrum, compromising on many “Islamist” demands. During the drafting of the 2014 constitution, for instance, Ennahda chose not to make sharia (Islamic law) the basis of legislation, and instead enshrined gender equality and freedom of conscience. These compromises are popularly attributed to Ghannouchi, making him an important representative of a “moderate” Islamism.

These compromises, however, did not sit well with some more right-wing figures within Ennahda. Among the most prominent critics was Sheikh Habib Ellouze, who gained a reputation as a “firebrand” for insisting Ennahda take a more Islam-centered approach to the constitution. During the debate over freedom of conscience, for instance, he famously declared its proponent, a secular member of parliament (MP), “an enemy of Islam.” Ellouze and other more conservative members of Ennahda were not re-nominated by the party to run in the 2014 elections, and have steadily been marginalized in its political activities. However, Ellouze has become more involved in preaching activities since Ennahda separated this function from its political actions in 2016. It is therefore plausible that Ellouze may continue to carry religious authority beyond that which Ghannouchi and other more moderate Ennahda figures command. We therefore also included Ellouze in the survey to represent this more conservative faction of Ennahda.

We included two state religious authorities: Othman Battikh, the grand mufti, and Hussein al-Obeidi, the former grand imam of Al-Zaytuna Mosque. Battikh, grand mufti since 2016, had previously been grand mufti between 2008 and 2013 and was minister of religious affairs from 2015 to 2016. Battikh holds a degree in Islamic law from Zayouna University, where he examined and praised former President Habib Bourguiba's 1956 Code of Personal Status, which banned polygamy and enshrined a woman's right to divorce. As grand mufti, Battikh is responsible for advising the state on religious matters and answering citizens’ questions about religion, as well as for determining the start of Ramadan and other religious holidays and for overseeing conversions. In an email interview, Battikh claimed that the mufti is “independent in his positions and activities and

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4 Rachid Ghannouchi (Ennahda president), interview with the author, February 8, 2018.


6 Habib Ellouze (Ennahda Sheikh), interview with the author, February 9, 2018.
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enjoys freedom in conducting them.”

His position on equal inheritance, however, may belie this autonomy: Battikh publicly opposed equal inheritance when proposed by independent MP Mehdi Ben Gharbia in 2016, but supported it when the measure was proposed by President Beji Caid Essebsi in 2017. This lack of independence from the government is thought, at least in academic literature, to undermine the credibility of such religious authorities.

The second “state” religious authority is Hussein al-Obeidi, the grand imam of Al-Zaytuna mosque, Tunisia’s preeminent institution for Islamic thought. Zaytuna is the oldest mosque in Tunis, and its accompanying university—the oldest in the Muslim world, dating back to A.D. 736—has produced renowned reformist thinkers like Ibn Khaldun, Tahar Haddad, Tahar Ben Ahour, and Abdelaziz Thaalbi, along with most of Tunisia’s historic ulama (it is roughly equivalent to Egypt’s Al-Azhar). Though Tunisia’s university was closed by former President Bourguiba in the 1950s, it has now re-opened since the revolution. Obeidi, grand imam until 2015, oversaw this renewed importance of Al-Zaytuna University.

Both Grand Imam Obeidi and Grand Mufti Battikh represent Tunisia’s modern, liberal, largely state-imposed interpretation of Islam.

The survey also included several Salafi and jihadi-oriented figures. In April 2011, Tunisia saw the emergence of Ansar al-Sharia, a popular salafi organization that mobilized as an anti-system political challenger. Its leader, Seifallah Ben Hassine (better known as Abu Iyad al-Tunisi), had previously fought in Afghanistan alongside Osama bin Laden, and led the storming of the U.S. embassy in Tunis in September 2012. The Tunisian government labeled Ansar al-Sharia a terrorist organization in August 2013 and has since been fighting its militants, many of whom have re-grouped into organizations affiliated with Al-Qaeda or the Islamic State.

In addition to Abu Iyadh, the survey includes the Salafi Sheikh Khatib al-Idrissi, considered “the most respected Salafi-jihadi cleric outside Ansar al-Sharia.” In 2011, Idrissi built and began preaching in an unregistered mosque named “al-Ummah” in the Sidi Ali Ben Aoun delegation of Sidi Bouzid, where he inspired many jihadists until the government took control of his mosque in 2016.

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7 Othman Battikh (grand mufti of Tunisia), interview with the author, July 17, 2018.
8 Battikh most recently opposed it again in November 2018, when the bill was finally sent to parliament.
10 His successor, Hichem Ben Mahmoud, is not as well known, therefore we used Obeidi’s name in the survey.
11 See Aaron Zelin, “Meeting Tunisia’s Ansar al-Sharia,” Foreign Policy (blog), March 8, 2013, https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/03/08/meeting-tunisias-ansar-al-sharia/.
Finally, the survey also included one Sufi thinker, Mazen Cherif. While understudied in the literature, Sufi shrines reportedly outnumber mosques in Tunisia. One survey suggests that 43 percent of Tunisians visit a Sufi shrine at least once a year, though they may be viewed more as cultural rather than religious institutions. Cherif is among the most well-known of Tunisian Sufis, in part due to his activity on social media documenting his many international travels to Sufi conferences. Cherif, who lives in Sousse, noted that Salafis destroyed many Sufi shrines after the revolution, but that the Sufi community has continued its activities. Cherif is also a security analyst for the Tunisian Center for Global Security Studies, and a regular commentator on security issues, which has contributed to his familiarity.

There is therefore no shortage of religious authorities in Tunisia to turn to for guidance in interpreting Islam. Whom among them do Tunisians trust most? In our survey, we asked this question both directly and indirectly.

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15 See also his website: [http://mazencherif.com/ar/](http://mazencherif.com/ar/).
16 Mazen Cherif (Sufi sheikh), Sousse, interview with the author, July 14, 2018.
Methods and Results

The survey asked two direct questions about respondent’s attitudes toward these 13 figures. The first asked: “Which of the religious leaders below do you approve of? Please select all that apply.” Figure 1 presents the results. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan was by far the most popular figure, with 25 percent of the sample approving of him, consistent with elsewhere in the region. The Egyptian televangelist Amr Khaled and Ennahdha founder Rachid Ghannouchi tied for second, each garnering the approval of just 10 percent of the sample. Notably, in this direct question, very few respondents expressed support for the Islamic State’s Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi or for Ansar al-Sharia’s Abu Iyadh, with each garnering 0.3 percent approval.

**Figure 1. Level of Approval, Religious Figures**

![Graph showing level of approval for various religious figures, with Erdogan at 24.8% and few others at lower percentages.]

Source: Author’s analysis
The second direct question asked respondents for their level of trust in each of the 13 figures: “On a scale of 1 to 5, please tell us how much you trust each of the following individuals as an authority on matters of faith and Islamic practice.” This question thus provides two improvements over the approval question: First, the response scale ranged from 1 (do not trust at all) to 5 (completely trust), allowing for greater variation, and second, it is framed explicitly in assessing each figure’s “authority on matters of faith and Islamic practice.” Figure 2 presents the results.

**Figure 2. Level of Trust, Religious Figures**

Source: Author’s analysis

Again, Erdogan places first, suggesting that Tunisians not only approve of him but also trust him as a religious authority. The second most trusted figure is the Grand Imam of Zaytouna Hussein el-Obeidi, followed by Ahmed Tayeb, the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar. Interestingly, Ghannouchi, while tied for second-highest approval among the religious figures included in the survey, ranked relatively low in terms of trust as a religious authority. Finally, once again, very few respondents expressed trust in jihadi figures like Baghdadi or Abu Iyadh. While there may genuinely be low support for them, these direct questions may also suffer from social desirability bias, whereby respondents do not feel comfortable openly expressing support for such figures.
Endorsement Experiment

One solution to counter this potential social desirability bias in the survey is to measure indirect support for each of the 13 religious figures. In particular, we implemented a series of endorsement experiments in which respondents were asked for their level of support for a statement, rather than an individual. The 14 statements all concerned interpretations of Islam, such as: “Sharia law is a requirement of living in a Muslim country and historically has been so; therefore, Muslims should uphold Sharia law” or “The Quran and the Sunna instruct us that non-Muslim minorities should have equal citizenship with Muslims in all aspects.” The statements covered a variety of issues, including the political system, the rights of women and minorities, attitudes toward jihad and violence, and attitudes toward Western intervention. Half of the statements can be considered liberal interpretations, while half are conservative (see the full list of statements in the appendix). Respondents indicated their support using a five-point scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5).

The experimental component was to randomize which of the 13 figures made those statements, asking, “Do you agree with the following statement by [name of religious figure]:”

Across the 14 statements, each respondent saw each of the 13 religious figures as well as a control statement with no endorser in a random order. Pooling across respondents, we can then compare the level of support for the same statement when it is endorsed by any religious leader compared to when there is no endorsement (the control). If a statement sees higher support when endorsed by a particular figure relative to the control, that can be interpreted as evidence of support for the figure, since the statement is the same. For instance, if in general support for sharia law is a “3” on the five-point scale when there is no endorser, but support increases to 3.5 when endorsed by Ghannouchi, then that difference—0.5 points—can be interpreted as the effect of Ghannouchi’s endorsement increasing support for the statement. The endorsement experiment also allows us to compare the effect of the different endorsers themselves: if an endorsement by Baghdadi only increased support for a statement by 0.2, for instance, that would suggest Ghannouchi is more popular than Baghdadi.

The endorsement questions feature two advantages over the previous direct questions. First, they ask for support for a statement attributed to a potentially controversial figure, rather than support for the figure directly, thereby reducing the social desirability bias over, for instance, openly supporting a jihadist. Second, while the direct questions capture self-reported attitudes in support of the various figures, the endorsement questions represent a behavioral measure of each religious figure’s sway over respondents. The endorser is influencing respondents’ views, increasing their support for an interpretation of Islam. That is directly capturing what we mean by religious authority—actual sway over one’s followers.

In the debrief following the survey, we revealed that those figures did not actually make these statements.
We first plotted the average endorsement effect across all 14 statements for each of the 13 endorsers. Figure 3 reveals these results. Overall, the Islamic State’s Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi emerges as the figure with the most sway, on average increasing respondents’ support for each statement by 0.5 points (on the five-point scale) relative to the control. Baghdadi is followed by two state religious authorities: Grand Mufti Othman Battikh and Grand Imam of Zaytouna Hussein Obeidi. The endorsement effect of both Sufi Sheikh Mazen Cherif and Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Ahmed Tayeb, lean positive, but these effects are not statistically different from 0. All other figures, including Ennahdha’s Ghannouchi and Ellouze, lean negative, i.e., when they endorse a statement, support for it decreased relative to the control. In the following sections, I discuss each group in turn.

**Figure 3. Endorsement Effects**

[Diagram showing endorsement effects for various figures]

Source: Author’s analysis

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18 The R package “endorse” allows us to combine all 14 statements and extract an underlying level of support for each of the endorsers.
Salafi-Jihadists
Among all 13 figures, al-Baghdadi claimed the highest endorsement effect, on average increasing respondents’ support for each statement by 0.5 points (on the five-point scale) relative to the control. This is corroborated when analyzing each statement separately: Baghdadi elicits a positive and significant or marginally significant response on seven of the 14 questions, far more than any other figure (the second-most popular individual only had such effects on three of the statements). Predictably, his support is highest among statements that are in line with his views: endorsing the caliphate, confirming that there is a war against Islam, praising Al-Qaeda, condemning apostasy, relegating women to the household, and support for sharia.

Figure 4, for instance, plots the endorsement effects for the statement: “Western nations are attacking Muslims in Islamic countries such as Palestine, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya. These crimes against Muslims by the West are a clear declaration of war on God and Islam.” When endorsed by Baghdadi, agreement with this statement was about 0.6 points higher on the five-point scale than when there was no endorser.

**Figure 4.** Endorsement Effect: War on Islam

![Endorsement Effect: War on Islam](source: Author’s analysis)
Baghdadi’s sway over Tunisians may help to explain why Tunisia has sent the highest number of foreign fighters per capita to the Islamic State. About 2,900 Tunisians fought in Iraq and Syria, while an additional 27,000 attempted the trek but were stopped by Tunisian authorities.\textsuperscript{19} Yet these numbers alone do not explain why Tunisia has exported so many foreign fighters. Is it because Tunisians genuinely support IS more than other populations, or is it simply because it is easier for Tunisians to leave their country than it is elsewhere in the region? The survey results validate the assumption that Tunisia’s high rate of fighters implies a high level of support for IS, rather than an easier ability to travel. And while support for Baghdadi may have been expected given the number of foreign fighters, the extent of his support among Tunisians—far above that of any other religious figure—is surprising and normatively troubling.

This support for Baghdadi may also be influencing some Tunisians’ relative openness to returning foreign fighters. According to the 2018 Afrobarometer survey, 30 percent of Tunisians would prefer that returnees be rehabilitated (27 percent) or left alone (3 percent), allowing them to be reintegrated into society. For a sizable minority of Tunisians, fighting for the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria does not warrant punishment or even a trial.

On the other hand, while some Tunisians appear to support jihad abroad, they do not support it in their own backyard. The two Salafi-jihadist figures operating in Tunisia—Salafi Sheikh Khatib al-Idrissi and Ansar al-Sharia leader Abu Iyadh—saw the lowest endorsement effects of any religious figure. Indeed, they saw strong negative endorsement effects, with support for a statement decreasing by 0.2–0.5 points when their names were associated with it. Both in the direct and indirect questions, these Tunisian salafi-jihadi figures performed the worst of all 13 figures.

These results suggest that Tunisians do not support fundamentalist or violent Islamists in their own backyard, even while supporting it abroad. Indeed, both Idrissi and Iyadh seemed to understand that at first, declaring in 2011 and 2012 that Tunisia was a “land of da’wa (proselytizing)” only, not jihad.\textsuperscript{20} But Ansar al-Sharia later shifted toward violence at home, perhaps undercutting the genuine support the group had at first.


\textsuperscript{20} Zelin, “Meeting Tunisia’s Ansar al-Sharia.”
State Authorities
After Baghdadi, the next two most popular figures in the endorsement experiment were Grand Mufti Othman Battikh, and the former Grand Imam of Zaytouna mosque, Hussein Obeidi. Respondents' support for each statement increased by 0.15-0.17 points on average on the five-point scale when they were attributed to Battikh and Obeidi, but this average masks wide variation by statement. Battikh and Obeidi both see their strongest support on general statements concerning religion and society. The first is: “Sharia law is a requirement of living in a Muslim country and historically has been so; Therefore, Muslims should uphold sharia law.” On this question, an endorsement by Battikh or Obeidi increased support for the statement by 0.55 and 0.47 points, respectively, even higher than Baghdadi (0.41).

Figure 5. Endorsement Effect: Sharia

Source: Author’s analysis
The second statement concerned apostasy: “Many people in the Muslim world do not properly follow God’s law. I am glad that there are Islamic groups that watch over the society to make sure that there are no apostates.” On this question, an endorsement by Battikh or Obeidi increased support by 0.83 and 0.92 points, respectively.

**Figure 6.** Endorsement Effect: Anti-Apostasy

![Endorsement Effect: Anti-Apostasy](image)

Source: Author’s analysis

Interestingly, Battikh also saw a marginally significant positive effect for statements condemning IS attacks, while Obeidi saw a strongly significant effect on statements in favor of a secular state. In short, the most popular religious figures in Tunisia—Baghdadi and Battikh/Obeidi—represent two diametrically opposed interpretations of Islam, perhaps reflecting polarization in Tunisia regarding religious issues.

The relatively strong performance of Tunisia’s state religious authorities is somewhat surprising. The conventional wisdom suggests that such figures are too close to the state to be credible interpreters of Islam. Moreover, in my experience, very few Tunisians actually knew Battikh and Obeidi’s names, but the importance of their institutions apparently should not be underestimated. The survey results suggest that despite their ties to the state, these religious institutions still carry considerable legitimacy on religious matters.
The relative importance of state authorities has important policy implications. It would suggest that the grand mufti’s public support for equal inheritance in August 2017 should not be simply dismissed. While justifying equal inheritance on religious grounds is particularly difficult, our survey results suggest that an endorsement by the grand mufti could move the needle at least a few percentage points. Unfortunately, the grand mufti’s subsequent reversal on this issue, publicly opposing equal inheritance once the bill was finally sent to the parliament in November 2018, may doom this proposal, at least in its current version.

**Ennahdha**

Perhaps the most surprising takeaway is the poor performance of Ennahdha as a religious authority. In terms of general approval, Ennahdha’s president, Sheikh Rachid Ghannouchi, received one of the highest levels of support (10 percent of the sample). However, Ghannouchi received relatively low scores when evaluated specifically “as a religious authority” (1.8 out of 5), as did Ennahdha’s conservative wing, represented by Sheikh Habib Ellouze (1.7). Finally, both Ghannouchi and Ellouze saw strong negative endorsement effects, whereby support for a statement decreased when endorsed by these figures.

While Ennahdha continues to win at the polls—receiving, for instance, the most votes of any party in the 2018 municipal elections—these results suggest that it is no longer (or perhaps never was) viewed as a religious authority. While we can only speculate as to why, it is possible that Ennahdha’s repeated compromises on issues of religion may have undermined its credibility on such issues. Its refusal to enshrine sharia in the 2014 constitution, its support for gender equality and freedom of conscience, and its choice to publicly distance itself from political Islam in declaring itself a Muslim democratic party may all have weakened its religious base. Indeed, survey data from the Arab Barometer suggest that Ennahdha’s loss of support has been sharpest among Tunisians who wish to see sharia as the basis of legislation. As a result of this ideological transformation, Tunisians looking for conservative religious authority no longer find it in Ennahdha.

As the “moderate middle” of the religious spectrum becomes delegitimized, supporters may find authority instead in the extremes. This may help to explain the aforementioned high level of support for extremes on both ends, whether for the Islamic state or state religious authorities. Moreover, Ennahdha’s loss of religious credibility may also make it vulnerable to a challenge from a new, more conservative Islamist party, were one to emerge.

Since our December 2017 survey, Ennahdha has taken a stronger stance on religious issues, repeatedly and publicly opposing Essebsi’s proposal for equal inheritance explicitly as a violation of the Quran and the Sunna. This renewed deployment of religious rhetoric,

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22 See [https://goo.gl/7dEJDC](https://goo.gl/7dEJDC). In January 2019, however, Battikh claimed that he was continuing to study the matter. See also [https://www.realites.com.tn/2019/01/egalite-successorale-le-dialogue-doit-se-poursuivre-selon-othmane-battikh/](https://www.realites.com.tn/2019/01/egalite-successorale-le-dialogue-doit-se-poursuivre-selon-othmane-battikh/).

23 Grewal, “Where are Ennahdha’s Competitors.”
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which to date has been accompanied by an unwillingness to compromise on this issue, may be an attempt to regain its religious authority. However, it remains to be seen whether such attempts are “too little, too late” or if they can actually shore up Ennahdha's image as a religious authority. Regardless, it is important to underscore that even as Ennahdha loses credibility as a religious actor, it still maintains support for its role as a political party, as evidenced by its continued electoral victories.

Conclusion

Our survey yielded three surprising findings regarding religious authority in Tunisia. First, while the moderate Islamist party Ennahdha performs well in elections, it is not widely viewed as an authority on religious matters. Second, traditional religious authorities like the grand mufti and grand imam of Zaytuna mosque enjoy substantial popularity despite their association with and dependence on the Tunisian state. Finally, the Islamic State continues to wield considerable religious authority in Tunisia, even while domestic Salafi-jihadi groups like Ansar al-Sharia do not.

Methodologically, this report underscores how the wording of survey questions can have major implications for the results. Ennahdha's Rachid Ghannouchi, for instance, was among the highest-ranked officials in terms of general approval, but garnered much less support when evaluated specifically “as a religious authority.” Moreover, in both of the direct questions, few respondents openly stated their support for extremist figures like Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, even though the endorsement experiment indicated higher approval of Baghdadi on matters of religious interpretation. This suggests a social desirability bias, which highlights the need to employ new survey techniques for such sensitive questions.
Appendix: Endorsement Questions

Each statement was preceded by the following (with the part in italics excluded for the control group): Do you agree with the following statement by [name]:

1. The Quran and the Sunna enjoin caliphate as the proper Islamic political system that Muslims should establish.

2. I am in favor of democratic elections, because they are useful tools for establishing an Islamic state.

3. Sharia law is a requirement of living in a Muslim country and historically has been so; therefore, Muslims should uphold sharia law.

4. The core principles of shariah are sacred and unchanging; however, various components of sharia laws conflict with modernity. We must, therefore, re-interpret sharia to make it more appropriate for modern times.

5. American military intervention in Syria is un-Islamic and must be denounced by all Muslims. It is a clear violation of Quranic precepts for Christians to step on Muslim lands.

6. Western nations are attacking Muslims in Islamic countries such as Palestine, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya. These crimes against Muslims by the West are a clear declaration of war on God and Islam.

7. Muslims should urge the U.S. and other Western countries to intervene in Yemen to stop the ongoing famine where 12 million people face the risk of starvation. We have an Islamic obligation to invite Western countries, when necessary, to stop human suffering.

8. Al-Qaeda is serving Islam well by undertaking jihad to protect Muslims when not many Muslims have done so; therefore, we should express our support for Al-Qaeda in the strongest terms possible.

9. Muslims recognize that all innocent life is sacred and denounce groups like ISIS for the indiscriminate violence and terror they spread in Europe and beyond. These heinous crimes violate the tolerant teachings of Islam. [Note: Baghdadi was not permitted to be an endorser for this statement.]

10. Many people in the Muslim world do not properly follow God's law. I am glad that there are Islamic groups that watch over the society to make sure that there are no apostates.

11. The Quran and the Sunna are very clear in assigning different roles to men and women. Women's primary roles are domestic; women should not pursue careers outside of the house and should instead attend to their children.

12. The Holy Quran and the practice of Salafi Saleheen mandate us protect the honor of our families. Women who bring dishonor to their families and Islam should be penalized for their crimes.
13. The Quran and the Sunna instruct us that non-Muslim minorities should have equal citizenship with Muslims in all aspects.

14. A secular state does not mean that the people are atheists; it means respect for all religions and each individual has the freedom to practice his own religion.