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Too Strategic for the Base: How the Nidaa–Ennahdha Alliance Has Done More Harm Than Good

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Control of Tunisia's political apparatus has vacillated between the country's two leading parties—Nidaa Tounes and Ennahdha—for most of its post-revolutionary history. Nidaa, a loose coalition of Bourguibists, former regime figures, and leftists, was formed in 2012 explicitly as a counterweight to Ennahdha, an Islamist party that has existed since 1989.¹ However, the July 2016 Carthage Agreement, which established a national unity government under Prime Minister Youssef Chahed (a Nidaa member), has seen the parties grow increasingly close, leading to a joint Ennahdha–Nidaa coordination committee in June 2017 and a new “troika” in November 2017, when the two parties formed an alliance with the economically liberal and anti-Islamist Free Patriotic Union (UPL) party.²

This paper examines what impact the strategic alliance between Nidaa and Ennahdha has had on Ennahdha's popular support. Although the “marriage” between Nidaa and Ennahdha was formally dissolved in January 2018, it is important to understand how voters interpreted the compromises Ennahdha's leaders made by cozying up to Nidaa. Specifically, in the context of the Nidaa–Ennahdha alliance, is there space in the Tunisian political landscape for voters who favor a stronger relationship between religion and government?

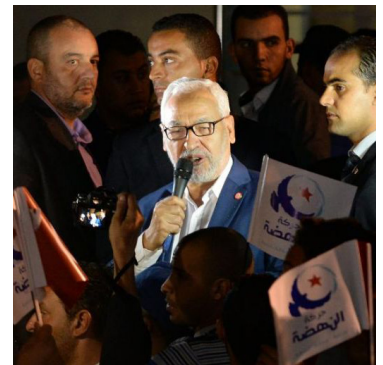
Using survey data that examines levels of support for Ennahdha and Nidaa as well as views on the relationship between Islam and politics, I argue that Ennahdha's decision to partner with Nidaa

was strategic and coincided with an overall decline in public support for a strong relationship between Islam and politics. However, at the same time, support for the party and its leaders has declined and the alliance has failed to net Ennahdha important political wins. Furthermore, the Nidaa–Ennahdha alliance has contributed to the Tunisian public's growing dissatisfaction with formal politics, which has potentially dangerous consequences for the country's democratic transition.

WHAT DOES ENNAHDHA STAND FOR?

Ennahdha has maintained a clear religious foundation throughout its nearly 30-year history. Ennahdha's July 2012 statute characterizes the party as a “moderate Islamist national political party.”³ And the party's 2011 electoral program lists Islam as a “supreme point of reference that is balanced and interactive with any human expertise of proven benefit, through the method of *ijtihad* [interpretation].”⁴ The party also strongly advocates for justice, dignity, and freedom—what Cavatorta and Merone call the “fundamental social goals of Islam.”⁵ While the party has long accepted democratic principles and procedures, it has served as the home for Islamist voters—those who would like to see a role for religion in lawmaking and governance.

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Rachid Ghannouchi explained after the split, “Ennahdha has moved beyond its origins as an Islamist party and has fully embraced a new identity as a party of Muslim Democrats... [It] is no longer both a political party and a social movement.”⁷ Ghannouchi justified the move, arguing that because religious freedom is enshrined in the Tunisian constitution, Ennahdha no longer needs to protect Islam.⁸

While this radical change may have satisfied Western donors and the region’s secularists who fear the rise of the Islamic State and do not want to see a repeat of the Egyptian experience with the Muslim Brotherhood, members of Ennahdha’s base “continue to call for an increased role for Islam in politics, irrespective of the formal separation between preaching and political activities.”⁹ And according to a November 2017 survey by the International Republican Institute (IRI), a large percentage of Tunisians today (60%) want a *greater* role for religion in government, which would suggest that Ennahdha should distance itself from Nidaa and embrace Islamism, not the other way around.¹⁰

But while 60% may seem like a high number of residents advocating for a closer relationship between religion and politics in what is often seen as a highly secular country, it is actually a 10 percentage point decrease from 70% of survey respondents in June 2014 who said that religion should play a role in government and lawmaking.¹¹ Furthermore, when the data is broken down by political affiliation, the numbers tell an even more interesting story.

In IRI’s June 2014 survey, 84% of those who planned to vote for Ennahdha wanted a significant role for Islam in government, compared to 63% of Nidaa voters at that time.¹² In the November 2017 poll, however, only 62% of Ennahdha voters wanted a significant role for Islam in government—a 22 percentage point drop. Support for a religious government also decreased among Nidaa voters, but to a much lesser extent—from 63% to 55%, or an 8 percentage point drop.¹³ Thus, in the past three years, Ennahdha voters have dramatically *decreased* their support for a stronger relationship between religion and politics, at a much higher rate than the Tunisian public overall.

One could argue that Ennahdha’s policy changes, which will be discussed in more detail below, have caused the attitudinal changes among its base. However, if the party’s shift away from political Islam was driving public attitudes, we should also expect to see an increase in public support for the party and its leadership. But we find the opposite, that concurrent with Ennahdha’s policy shift is a decrease in favorability ratings for both the party and the policy shift’s main champion—Ghannouchi. Thus, we find that both Ennahdha’s leadership and a portion of Ennahdha voters are satisfied with the current more limited role of religion in politics as well as the ability of the constitution to protect religious practice and belief and do not see a need to push for stronger protections. However, the decision to distance the party from its founding principles has also alienated many Ennahdha voters, causing them to exit the political scene and netting few political victories for the party.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE ENNAHDHA–NIDAA RELATIONSHIP

Ennahdha led the Tunisian government from December 2011 to January 2014, under Prime Ministers Hamadi Jebali and Ali Laarayedh. The Laarayedh government was forced to step down in January 2014, bringing independent Prime Minister Mehdi Jomaa to power. When Nidaa bested Ennahdha in the October 2014 parliamentary elections, winning 86 seats to Ennahdha’s 69, Ennahdha chose to participate in the new government of Prime Minister Habib Essid, a technocrat, after Essid failed to form a government without them. However, the decision to join Essid’s government only netted Ennahdha the labor ministry and three secretary of state positions.

In 2016, the resignation of 28 Nidaa members of parliament (MPs) over anger with the Ennahdha alliance reduced Nidaa’s seats in parliament from 86 to 58. This made Ennahdha the largest party in parliament once again (with 69 seats). Given this power shift, Ennahdha fared better in the August 2016 national unity government under Chahed, garnering three ministries—trade, employment and vocational training, and communication technologies and the digital economy.¹⁴

However, Ennahdha’s participation in the various Nidaa governments has been relatively limited, with a clear dominance by Nidaa. None of its cabinet positions are particularly influential, and it does not hold the ministries of education, religious affairs, social affairs, or cultural affairs, arenas traditionally sought by religious parties. Furthermore, Ennahdha has won few, if any, political victories. The municipal elections, which Ennahdha is likely to dominate, have been postponed numerous times. While Ennahdha’s performance has suffered at the national level as of late, the party is still well-placed for a strong showing in most of Tunisia’s interior and rural governorates due to its presence in every governorate and its strong grassroots apparatus.¹⁵

Ennahdha has also witnessed major challenges to its social justice platform; its transitional justice process has been undermined and anti-corruption efforts have been woefully underfunded and lack political support.¹⁶ And one of Ennahdha’s key principles—the protection of the Revolution—has been threatened by the return of several members of the Ben Ali government during the latest cabinet reshuffle.¹⁷

PLAYING THE LONG GAME?

A common explanation offered for Ennahdha’s recent moves is that the party is playing a long-term game, staying away from controversy and positioning itself as nonthreatening in order to stay in power and eventually seize it. As Netterstrom argues,

*What mattered [for Ennahdha] was political calculation geared toward gaining and keeping power. For the sake of the party’s overarching goals, some elements of Islamist ideology had to be left behind... Ennahdha made these compromises out of political necessity, and only later developed an ideological rationale for them.*¹⁸

But if Ennahdha is moving more toward Nidaa out of a desire to gain and keep power, it is miscalculating the impact these moves may have on its base. Ennahdha’s unfavorability ratings have risen from 56% in August 2017 to 59% in November 2017. Conversely, Nidaa’s unfavorability rating has gone down, with

41% of those surveyed saying they have an “unfavorable” opinion of the party in November 2017, compared to 48% in August 2017.¹⁹

Furthermore, Ghannouchi has the highest unfavorability rating of any of the political figures listed in IRI’s poll, at 63% (with an additional 5% rating him “somewhat unfavorable”). This is a slight increase from August 2017, when he received a 60% unfavorability rating. Comparatively, the political figures with the next two highest unfavorability ratings are Hafedh Caid Essebsi, the president’s infamous son (57%), and UPL’s Slim Riahi, who is currently the subject of a massive corruption investigation (56%).²⁰ Conversely, President Beji Caid Essebsi has a 45% unfavorability rating, while Prime Minister Chahed’s unfavorability is at just 18%.

THE WAY FORWARD: THREE POSSIBLE SCENARIOS

The growing discontent with Ennahdha that coincides with the alliance could lead to three possible outcomes. First, Ennahdha voters may continue to turn away from the party and instead move toward informal politics.²¹ This could lead to further erosion of trust between the public and the political system, which will likely manifest in a continuing cycle of protest and repression. As one Tunisian activist told me, “Ennahdha voters will not choose anyone but Ennahdha—they would rather not vote than vote for someone else.”²² If this is the case, we should expect to see lower levels of voter turnout by Ennahdha supporters in the upcoming municipal elections this year and in the 2019 presidential and parliamentary elections. This would be very dangerous for the Tunisian political system, likely further consolidating power into the hands of a single party (Nidaa).

Second, some voters may seek an alternative party that provides a clearer articulation of pro-Islamist—albeit far more extreme—positions, such as Jebhat Islah and Hizb al-Tahrir, the latter of which has been repeatedly banned by Tunisian authorities.

Of course, Ennahdha is not a monolith. There is an increasing sense that Ennahdha is experiencing internal division, with some party leaders and members pushing back

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against some of the party's compromises. Thus, a third possible scenario would be for Ennahdha to split into two parties—one more strategic and in line with Ghannouchi, and one more ideological. But this is not as likely as long as Ghannouchi continues to control Ennahdha's moves. Additionally, should Nidaa split into multiple parties, as is likely the case, some of the more centrist Nahdawis (Ennahdha members) could find a home in one of the new parties, leaving Ennahdha to the more hardline elements. But an Ennahdha split is not inevitable. The most likely factors to trigger a split would be a poor electoral showing in the municipal elections or a change in party leadership, leaving room for potential jockeying among senior members of the party.

While compromise has been essential to keeping Tunisia's transition on track, the political marriage between Nidaa and Ennahdha has diluted the parties to the point where the majority of Tunisians do not identify with any party at all. In IRI's most recent poll, when asked which party they will support in the upcoming municipal elections, 62% of survey participants responded with "don't know" or refused to answer.²³

Finally, Ennahdha's loss of support is not due solely to its relationship with Nidaa, but rather also with its failure to achieve its objectives while in power. As Gerges argues,

A vote for the Islamists implied a clean break with the failed past and a belief (to be tested) that they could deliver the goods—jobs, economic stability, transparency, and inclusiveness. Thus, the political fortunes of Islamists will ultimately depend on whether they live up to their promises and meet the rising expectations of the Arab publics.²⁴

However, if voters were indeed holding parties accountable for their economic performance, certainly Nidaa's support numbers would be decreasing, not increasing.

CONCLUSION

It is clear that Ennahdha's decision to align with Nidaa has been politically more harmful than helpful. The relationship has

not only turned away voters, but also led to confusion over what Ennahdha really stands for. According to one Tunisian activist, "the only difference between Nidaa and Ennahdha today is that one drinks wine and the other drinks orange juice."²⁵ By failing to articulate a clear platform with explicit policy positions, Ennahdha has confused and alienated much of its base. And with no clear alternative for those who seek a stronger role for religion in politics, Ennahdha may have inadvertently empowered the more radical Salafist groups it has tried to tamp down over the past three years. As Georges Fahmi argues, Salafists were "incensed that Ennahdha sought reconciliation with the symbols of the former regime by agreeing to participate in a coalition government with the Nidaa Tounes party."²⁶

As Tunisia prepares for the May 6, 2018, municipal elections as well as the 2019 national elections, all parties would be well served by articulating a clear policy platform, something that voters can understand and identify with. To succeed in the elections, and to continue to play a major role on the Tunisian political stage, Ennahdha needs to do more than show up at the polls. It needs to decide if it is a strategic party primarily focused on staying in power and willing to compromise on its ideals in the short term, or if it is primarily a party of social justice, committed to protecting the principles of the Revolution, within an Islamist framework at all costs. Either way, in order to survive, Ennahdha must make its positions clear and find a way to convince a Tunisian public that is increasingly turning away from Ennahdha that it is a party they should support.

ENDNOTES

1. The party originally formed in 1981 as the "Movement for Islamic Tendency," but changed its name to Ennahdha in 1989.

2. See Appendix for a timeline of the Nidaa-Ennahdha relationship.

3. Anne Wolf, *Political Islam in Tunisia* (London: Hurst and Company, 2017), 175.

4. *Ibid.*, 170.

5. Francesco Cavatorta and Fabio Merone, "Post-Islamism, ideological evolution and 'la tunisianite' of the Tunisian

Islamist party al-Nahda,” *Journal of Political Ideologies* 20, no. 1 (2015): 27–42.

6. Wolf, *Political Islam in Tunisia*, and Rory McCarthy, “Ennahdha’s Next Move,” *Sada*, November 4, 2014: <http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/?fa=57120>.

7. Rached Ghannouchi, “From Political Islam to Muslim Democracy: The Ennahdha Party and the Future of Tunisia,” *Foreign Affairs* (2016): 58–69.

8. *Ibid.*

9. Wolf, *Political Islam in Tunisia*.

10. Center for Insights in Survey Research, *Public Opinion Survey of Tunisians: November 23–December 3, 2017*. (Washington, D.C.: International Republican Institute, 2017).

11. In June 2014, 50% of all respondents believed that “the principles of Islam should be one consideration but not the only consideration when making policy or law,” and an additional 20% believed that “Islamic texts should form the foundations of all policy and lawmaking.” In November 2017, 37% of those polled believed that “the principles of Islam should be one consideration but not the only consideration when making policy or law,” and an additional 23% believed that “Islamic texts should form the foundations of all policy and lawmaking.” See Center for Insights in Survey Research, *Public Opinion Survey of Tunisians: November 23–December 3, 2017*.

12. Among Ennahdha supporters, 28% of respondents believed that “Islamic texts should form the foundations of all policy and lawmaking” and an additional 56% believed that “the principles of Islam should be one consideration but not the only consideration when making policy or law.” See Center for Insights in Survey Research, *Public Opinion Survey of Tunisians: November 23–December 3, 2017*.

13. *Ibid.*

14. Following a cabinet reshuffle in September 2017, Ennahdha lost the ministry of vocational training to the liberal Afek Tounes party, but picked up the ministry of industry and small and medium-sized enterprises.

15. IRI’s polling on the municipal elections projects Ennahdha winning only 5% of the vote (second to Nidaa’s 12% and tied with Jebha Chaabia). However, 62% of

survey respondents said they didn’t know what party they will vote for or refused to answer. See Center for Insights in Survey Research, *Public Opinion Survey of Tunisians: November 23–December 3, 2017*.

16. Sarah Yerkes and Marwan Muasher, *Tunisia’s Corruption Contagion: A Transition at Risk* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace).

17. Sarah Yerkes, “Democracy Derailed?” *Foreign Affairs*, October 2, 2017.

18. Kasper Ly Netterstrom, “The Islamists’ Compromise in Tunisia,” *Journal of Democracy* 28, no. 4 (October 2015): 110–124.

19. Center for Insights in Survey Research, *Public Opinion Survey of Tunisians: November 23–December 3, 2017*.

20. Huffington Post Maghreb, “Slim Riahi condamné à 5 ans de prison pour l’affaire des chèques sans provision,” *Huffington Post Maghreb*, October 9, 2017.

21. For more on the impact of a shift away from formal to informal politics in Tunisia, see Sarah Yerkes, *Where Have all the Revolutionaries Gone?* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution).

22. Author’s conversation with Tunisian civil society activist, January 2018.

23. Center for Insights in Survey Research, *Public Opinion Survey of Tunisians: November 23–December 3, 2017*.

24. Fawaz A. Gerges, “The Islamist Moment: From Islamic State to Civil Islam?” *Political Science Quarterly* 128, no. 3 (2013): 389–426.

25. Author’s conversation with Tunisian civil society activist, January 2018.

26. Georges Fahmi, “The Future of Political Salafism in Egypt and Tunisia,” *Carnegie Middle East Center*, November 16, 2015, <http://carnegie-mec.org/2015/11/16/future-of-political-salafism-in-egypt-and-tunisia-pub-61871>.

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APPENDIX — TIMELINE OF THE ENNAHDHA–NIDAA TOUNES POLITICAL COALITION

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- August 14, 2013** ● Ennahdha's Rachid Ghannouchi and Nidaa Tounes' Beji Caid-Essebsi meet discreetly in Paris in a meeting initiated by Slim Riahi of the Free Patriotic Union (UPL) and Nabil Karoui of Nessma TV. The pair discussed ways of getting out of political deadlock shortly after the assassination of Arab nationalist politician Mohamed Brahmi in July 2013.
- December 25, 2014** ● Essebsi announces that there will be no alliance with Ennahdha.
- February 2, 2015** ● Prime Minister Habib Essid announces an inclusive coalition government that includes members of Ennahdha.
- July 2015** ● Ennahdha and Nidaa Tounes plan to run on common lists for municipal elections (that were scheduled for 2016).
- January 9, 2016** ● Twenty-eight Nidaa Tounes members of parliament (MPs) defect during the party's congress in Sousse in protest of Nidaa's *mariage de raison* with Ennahdha.
- January 10, 2016** ● Former Nidaa Tounes Secretary General Mohsen Marzouk launches a new political party—Machrouu Tounes.
- July 13, 2016** ● The signing of the “Carthage Agreement” takes place in Carthage between Ennahdha, Nidaa Tounes, the Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT), the Tunisian Union of Industry, Trade and Handicrafts (UTICA), the Tunisian Union of Agriculture and Fishery (UTPA), the Free Patriotic Union (UPL), Afek Tounes, Machrouu Tounes, the National Destourian Initiative Party, the Joumhourri Party, and the Massar Party. The document laid out the foundation for a national unity government.
- June 8, 2017** ● A joint Ennahdha–Nidaa Tounes coordination committee is formed to bridge political differences, sparking controversy.
- November 15, 2017** ● Ennahdha and Nidaa Tounes make a new alliance with the Free Patriotic Union (headed by Slim Riahi) to form a new “troika.”
- January 7, 2018** ● Ennahdha and Nidaa Tounes announce the end of their alliance.