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Where Are Ennahdha's Competitors?

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FROM ISLAMISTS TO MUSLIM DEMOCRATS

The past decades have witnessed a remarkable transformation in the ideology of Tunisia's Ennahdha. While in the 1970s the movement could have been described as an "anti-democratic and illiberal movement [...] determined to impose religious law over democratic electoral decisions,"¹ it is today better known (and seeks to be known) as a Muslim Democratic party—a party inspired by Islam yet accepting core tenets of secular democracy. Particularly during the drafting of Tunisia's 2014 constitution, Ennahdha made considerable compromises, eschewing a reference to Islamic law and enshrining freedom of conscience and gender equality.²

Ennahdha's movement toward the center of the political spectrum raises the question of whether a new Islamist party will emerge to challenge Ennahdha from the right.³ On the one hand, Tunisia's electoral system (proportional representation without thresholds) is particularly conducive to new and niche parties, as evidenced by the plethora of secular parties.⁴ Yet on the other hand, despite the presence of a few small Salafi parties (such as *Jabha al-Islah*), Ennahdha today retains its monopoly of the Islamist constituency with no challenger in sight.

This brief explores the potential for a new Islamist party to emerge, analyzing whether there are prospective leaders and voters for such a party. It then speculates as to why a rival has not yet emerged, and what implications a potential rival may have for Tunisia's democratic transition.

REMOVING THE RIGHT

In analyzing the potential for an Islamist challenger, we must first ask whether there are conservative Ennahdha leaders who may split from the party. While observers have noted that a handful of conservative "firebrands" like Habib Ellouz and Sadok Chourou have recently been moved from politics to preaching,⁵ it is unclear what has happened to other conservative figures beyond these well-known personalities. Below, I show that Ennahdha has systematically sidelined conservative voices, removing them from leadership roles in the party. In particular, in choosing which members of the Constituent Assembly to renominate for the 2014 parliamentary elections, Ennahdha generally preferred its more liberal-minded members.⁶ Accordingly, a potential splinter party may have access to a pool of experienced ex-parliamentarians.

Figure 1 plots each of Ennahdha's 89 members of the 2011–2014 National Constituent Assembly (NCA) according to their "ideal points," or underlying ideologies. These ideal points were calculated by analyzing all 1,731 votes in the NCA using a methodology similar to that used by scholars of the U.S. Congress.⁷ On the left are more liberal members, such as Imed Hammami, Zied Ladhari, and Ameer Laarayedh. On the right are the more conservative members, like Ellouz and Chourou. The algorithm corresponds well to a qualitative reading of the NCA: the most conservative member according to the data, Nejb Mrad, was the single Ennahdha member to vote against



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These overall results also track with the key votes in the NCA. For instance, on January 4, 2014, the NCA voted on whether to enshrine the Quran and the Sunna as the basis of legislation.⁸ While this proposal ultimately failed, members of Ennahdha were split. Of the conservative Ennahdha MPs who voted yes, only 9 percent were renominated, compared to 47 percent of those who voted no or abstained.

In short, there are a number of experienced conservative leaders who appear to have been sidelined by Ennahdha and who could, in theory, form the leadership of a new party. While some of them may have voluntarily decided to leave politics, interviews with Ennahdha leaders confirm that many did not. In 2014, the executive board had to intervene in a number of party lists to block conservative individuals.⁹ Others were convinced to not even put forth their names. Sadok Chourou, for instance, observed, “The leadership is dominated by a specific political orientation, and that orientation states that in the best interests of the party, some figures and some faces serve the current phase better than others.”¹⁰

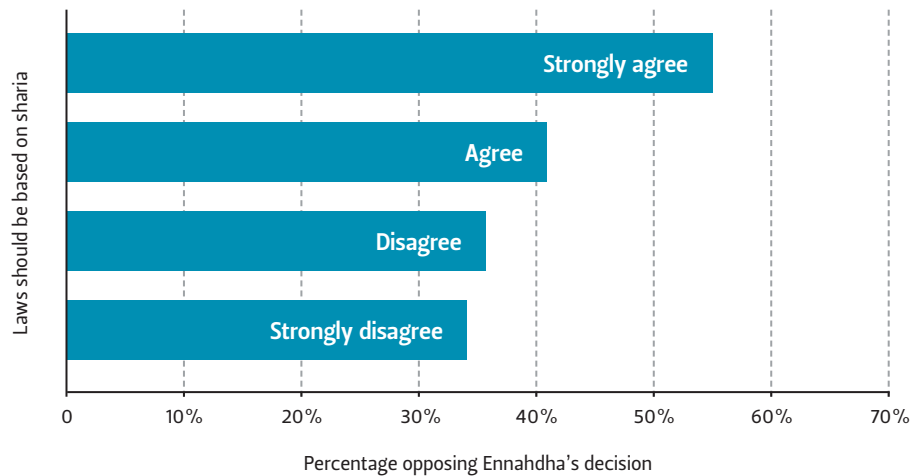
DISILLUSIONED VOTERS

A potential splinter party would need not only leaders, but also voters. Survey data suggest that there is a conservative flank of voters disappointed in Ennahdha’s compromises and potentially willing to support a more hardline party.

The primary evidence for this claim comes from an unrelated study my co-authors and I conducted of 505 residents of Tunis between May 31 and June 4, 2016. While not a representative sample of Tunisians nor of residents of Tunis, these data are still useful for examining the public’s immediate reaction to Ennahdha’s decision to leave political Islam, which was announced at its party congress held May 20–22 of that year.

In the study, 42 percent of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with “Ennahdha’s decision to leave political Islam.” Moreover, this disagreement was

FIGURE 2 — OPPOSITION TO ENNAHDHA’S DECISION TO LEAVE POLITICAL ISLAM



SOURCE Survey of 505 residents of Tunis conducted May 31–June 4, 2016, by Sharan Grewal, Amaney Jamal, Tarek Masoud, and Elizabeth Nugent

highest among the most conservative Tunisians. Figure 2 displays the percentage who disagreed with Ennahdha’s decision according to level of support for Islamic law, or sharia. Among respondents who strongly agreed that laws should be based on sharia, 55 percent opposed Ennahdha’s decision.¹¹

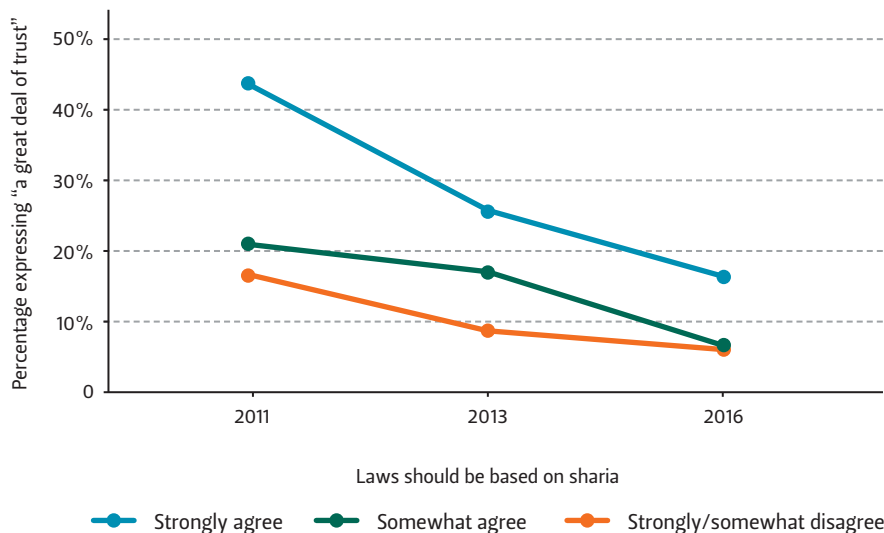
Second, we can examine nationally representative data from Arab Barometer surveys conducted in 2011, 2013, and 2016.¹² The Barometer asked respondents for their level of trust in Ennahdha, with the highest value being “a great deal of trust.” Overall, the percentage of respondents reporting a great deal of trust has fallen considerably—from 22 percent in 2011, to 16 percent in 2013, to 8.5 percent in 2016.

To examine if this decline in Ennahdha’s popularity is strongest among conservative respondents, Figure 3 plots Ennahdha’s popularity by a respondent’s level of support for sharia. Trust in Ennahdha fell across the board, suggesting that Ennahdha’s moves to the center did not win it domestic support even among those who do not support sharia (orange line). Among respondents who strongly agree that laws should be based on sharia (the blue line), trust in Ennahdha fell precipitously, from 43 percent in 2011 to just 17 percent in 2016.¹³ In

Survey data suggest that there is a conservative flank of voters disappointed in Ennahdha’s compromises and potentially willing to support a more hardline party.

short, there appears to be a base of voters who strongly support sharia and have lost trust in Ennahdha. These voters could potentially be picked up by a more hardline Islamist party.

FIGURE 3 — TRUST IN ENNAHDHA BY SUPPORT FOR SHARIA



SOURCE Arab Barometer

WHY NO RIVAL?

If the conditions are truly ripe for an Islamist challenger, why hasn't one yet emerged? The simple answer, as Ennahdha leader Said Ferjani observed, is that "the pace of social change is slow. The whole experience in Tunisia is still very young."¹⁴

Some conservative figures may also have calculated that for the time being, it may be advantageous to remain within Ennahdha. As a result of the separation or specialization of politics and preaching, Ellouz, Chourou, and other conservatives have been promised central roles in the preaching aspects of the movement. They may be mollified with these still influential roles, or they may anticipate using these institutions to challenge Ennahdha at a later date. Ellouz in particular mentioned that the upcoming parliamentary elections would be an important test: if Ennahdha loses considerably more votes than it did in 2014, it may create the momentum needed

to move Ennahdha back to the right.¹⁵ More generally, given Rachid Ghannouchi's age (76), it is possible that some conservatives are waiting to seize control of Ennahdha in a post-Ghannouchi era.

Others may view a splinter or competing party as simply not viable. Ennahdha's extensive grassroots infrastructure may be difficult for any potential challenger to match. Moreover, a challenger may have trouble securing the level of funds or media backing that Ennahdha now enjoys. Former prime minister Hamadi Jebali may be an important exception, as he is already a household name. If Jebali creates a rival party for his rumored 2019 presidential run, it may prove to be a significant threat to Ennahdha.

Even if electoral calculations would support a splinter party, Ennahdha leaders may be reluctant to cause a split. Nahdaouis often reference "the unity of the *ummah*" as encouraging them to have intense internal debates within the party, but not to publicly break away.¹⁶ Beyond these religious motivations, decades of shared repression under former autocratic regimes may have strengthened Ennahdha's identity and solidarity to the point of making a splinter party unlikely.¹⁷

If a challenger emerges, however, it will likely have important consequences for Tunisian politics. Ennahdha may need to demonstrate its conservative credentials, forcing it to move back to the right, just as the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood was pushed right by the Salafi Nour party. A rival party would likely increase the salience of the secular-religious cleavage and deepen political polarization, threatening the stability of Tunisia's democratic transition.

On the other hand, a competitor may provide political representation for conservative voters that currently feel abandoned by Ennahdha. On a normative level, a challenger may therefore be good for Tunisian democracy. Moreover, channeling these disillusioned, conservative voices into a peaceful political party, rather than leaving them potentially exploitable by violent extremist groups, may be important to Tunisia's long-term stability and security.

ENDNOTES

1. Francesco Cavatorta and Fabio Merone, "Moderation Through Exclusion? The Journey of the Tunisian Ennahdha from Fundamentalist to Conservative Party," *Democratization* 2, no. 5 (2013): 858. See also Anne Wolf, *Political Islam in Tunisia: The History of Ennahdha* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

2. Monica Marks, "Convince, Coerce, or Compromise? Ennahdha's Approach to Tunisia's Constitution" (Brookings Doha Center Analysis Paper Number 10, 2014).

3. While it is not the focus of this brief, Ennahdha has also made considerable compromises on the goals of the revolution, such as refusing to ban members of the old regime from running in the 2014 elections, forming an alliance with Nidaa Tounes, and endorsing the administrative reconciliation law. Ennahdha may therefore also be challenged by a more revolutionary splinter party.

4. Anne Wolf, *Can Secular Parties Lead the New Tunisia?* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2014).

5. See, for instance, Monica Marks, "How big were the changes Tunisia's Ennahdha party just made at its national congress?" *Monkey Cage* (blog), *The Washington Post*, May 25, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/05/25/how-big-were-the-changes-made-at-tunisias-ennahda-just-made-at-its-national-congress/?utm_term=.f9936d8e584d.

6. Each local branch of Ennahdha drafts their particular party list, which is then sent to the executive board for approval or modification.

7. See, for instance, Keith T. Poole and Howard Rosenthal, *Ideology & Congress* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). To compute ideal points, I used the emIRT approach proposed by Kosuke Imai, James Lo, and Jonathan Olmsted, "Fast Estimation of Ideal Points with Massive Data," *American Political Science Review* 110, no. 4 (2016): 631–56. Given the prevalence and strategic nature of an abstention in the NCA, I used an ordinal IRT that allowed abstentions

to be coded as a middle vote between yes and no. Absences were coded as missing data. I am indebted to *al-Bawsala* for sharing NCA voting data.

8. See the results of the vote here (in Arabic and French): <http://majles.marsad.tn/vote/52c92fa112bdaa7f9b90f423>.

9. Sahbi Atig, interview with author, Tunis, January 25, 2016. Atig noted that the executive board intervened in "four or five governorates" and in particular mentioned the electoral district of Sfax 2, where the aforementioned Habib Ellouz was not renominated.

10. Sadok Chourou, interview with author, Tunis, February 6, 2018.

11. In the sample, 27 percent of respondents strongly agreed that laws should be based on sharia.

12. In each wave, the Barometer surveyed roughly 1,200 Tunisians. Read more at <http://www.arabbarometer.org/report/tunisia>.

13. Importantly, the percentage of respondents who strongly support sharia has remained relatively stable, at 14 percent in 2011 and 12 percent in 2016.

14. Said Ferjani, interview with author, Tunis, February 2, 2018.

15. Habib Ellouz, interview with author, Tunis, February 9, 2018.

16. Chourou, interview.

17. Rafik Abdessalam, interview with author, Tunis, February 10, 2018.

AUTHOR

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