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## **ISLAM AND POLITICS IN POST-2011 TUNISIA**

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## INTRODUCTION

The relationship between religion and politics has been one of the defining elements of post-revolutionary Tunisia. What makes the country's transitional phase all the more intriguing is the fact that religion and religious actors were largely excluded from Tunisia's political system prior to the overthrow of the Ben Ali regime in January 2011. In the current democratization phase, religion and religious actors have assumed a political significance that Tunisia has not experienced in recent memory.

The country's oldest Islamist group, Ennahdha, has been the most critical actor in this process for several reasons. Not only was Ennahdha integral (until 2014) in the drafting of Tunisia's new constitution, the party also accepted major governmental roles, including that of a major coalition partner at one point.

In addition, Ennahdha's relations and interactions with Tunisia's secular and conservative actors have shaped the course of the relationship between religion and politics in important ways—and as a result of its multi-pronged approach to its role as a relevant and influential political actor, the party has similarly undergone a series of organizational and ideological changes.

Ennahdha's efforts to navigate the constraints imposed by secular actors, conservative groups, and Salafists have key implications for the way other Islamist actors in the rest of the Middle East may respond to similar constraints in their own societies. Ennahdha's experience is particularly informative because it offers a direct contrast to how the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood (Ikhwan al-Muslimin) responded to countervailing pressures from secular revolutionaries and fundamentalist Salafist actors. In some respects, Ennahdha's actions resemble those of the AKP in Turkey in the early 2000s, when the party embraced a Muslim democratic discourse to assure secular actors of its genuine interest in operating within the political mainstream; Ennahdha took a similar tack in 2016.

In this regard, the briefs that follow analyze Ennahdha's political outlook and its place in Tunisia's evolving political landscape since the Jasmine Revolution. While doing so, they pay particular attention to shifts in the relationship between religion and politics in the country.

In her paper "Too Strategic for the Base: How the Nidaa-Ennahdha Alliance has Done More Harm than Good," Sarah Yerkes analyzes Ennahdha's overtures to secularism and Tunisia's secular actors as the party sought to survive in a new political environment. Yerkes argues that Ennahdha's partnership with Nidaa Tounes led to uncertainty about what Ennahdha stands for—and also alienated the electorate, ultimately hurting the party more than it helped.

Sharan Grewal examines how Ennahdha's support base has responded to the party's recent ideological change as it embraced Muslim democracy and distanced itself from conservative Islamist discourse. Grewal's paper "Where are Ennahdha's Competitors?" utilizes original data to show that Ennahdha has been moving away from conservatism not only in its discourse but also by removing more conservative officials from the party's leadership.

Sabrina Zouaghi and Francesco Cavatorta focus on one particular outcome of Ennahdha's retreat from conservatism. In their paper "A Doomed Relationship: Ennahdha and Salafism," the authors show that as a fundamentalist political movement, Salafism can capitalize on the political space left behind by Ennahdha's shift toward the political mainstream. The prospects for a rejuvenated Salafist mobilization have also recently improved, in part due to the social and economic challenges Tunisians face.

In her brief, "The Reconfiguration of Ennahdha's Recruitment Strategy in Tunisia," Maryam Ben Salem analyzes the effects of Ennahdha's recent organizational changes, the transformation of the party's member

recruitment strategy, and its specialization policy. Ben Salem demonstrates that while the short-term effects of the membership changes are likely to be limited, the changes unleashed by a new crop of members will have long-term effects that firmly put Ennahdha on a secular path.

This compilation is based on “Islam and Politics in Post-2011 Tunisia,” a workshop held in Tunis on February 12, 2018. The workshop was part of a broader research project on “Building Pluralistic and Inclusive States Post-Arab Spring” that is generously supported by a grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York. The workshop was organized in collaboration with Al Kawakibi Democracy Transition Center (KADEM).

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# ISSUE BRIEF **04.25.18**

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

Sarah Yerkes, Ph.D., Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup>

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.”<sup>3</sup> 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].”<sup>4</sup> The party also strongly advocates for justice, dignity, and freedom—what Cavatorta and Merone call the “fundamental social goals of Islam.”<sup>5</sup> 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.

In late 2016, Ennahdha underwent its most dramatic shift, voting to split its religious and political wings—a move the party had rejected in 2012.<sup>6</sup> As party leader



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**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.**

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.”<sup>7</sup> Ghannouchi justified the move, arguing that because religious freedom is enshrined in the Tunisian constitution, Ennahdha no longer needs to protect Islam.<sup>8</sup>

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.”<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup>

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.<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup> 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.

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## 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.<sup>14</sup>

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.<sup>15</sup>

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.<sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup>

### 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.*<sup>18</sup>

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.<sup>19</sup>

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%).<sup>20</sup> 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.<sup>21</sup> 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.”<sup>22</sup> 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.<sup>23</sup>

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.<sup>24</sup>*

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."<sup>25</sup> 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."<sup>26</sup>

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.

# ISSUE BRIEF **04.26.18**

## Where Are Ennahdha's Competitors?

Sharan Grewal, M.A., Princeton University

### 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,"<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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,<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> 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, Nejjib Mrad, was the single Ennahdha member to vote against



**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.**



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.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> 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.”<sup>10</sup>

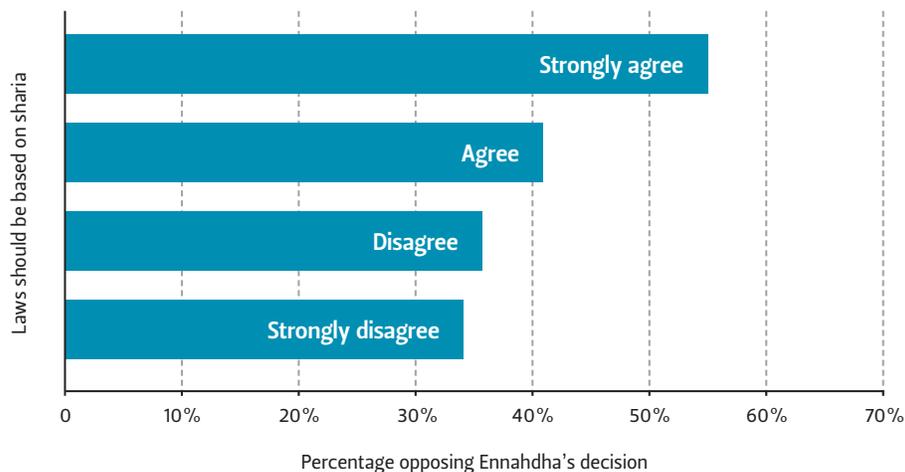
## DISILLUSIONED VOTERS

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.<sup>11</sup>

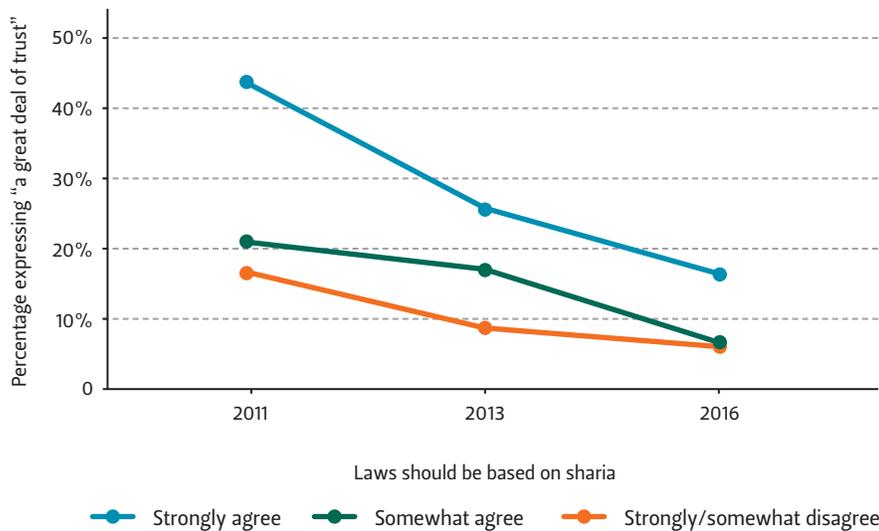
Second, we can examine nationally representative data from Arab Barometer surveys conducted in 2011, 2013, and 2016.<sup>12</sup> The Barometer asked respondents for their level of trust in Ennahdha, with the highest value being “a great deal of trust.” Overall, the percentage of respondents reporting 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.<sup>13</sup> 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."<sup>14</sup>

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.<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup>

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](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.

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# ISSUE BRIEF **04.27.18**

## **A Doomed Relationship: Ennahdha and Salafism**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Having weathered a period of volatility after President Ben Ali's sudden downfall, Tunisia's main political and social actors saw in the mechanisms of a procedural democracy the solution to their ideological and organizational problems. This coincided with the will of the majority of Tunisians and the hopes of the international community for the country's stability. Yet success in this process has led to the marginalization and exclusion of Salafism<sup>1</sup>—which represented a considerable number of Tunisia's marginalized youth—from the public sphere.

Building on fieldwork carried out in 2015 and 2017, this brief provides an overview of the complex relationship between Ennahdha<sup>2</sup> and Tunisian Salafism, and explains why and how Ennahdha “betrayed” its Salafist constituency. We argue that while Ennahdha's actions have had positive consequences for the stabilization of Tunisia's political system and contributed to reducing the perceived polarization between Islamists and laics, they have also prevented Salafi associations and groups to voice legitimate grievances through radical discourse and actions within a clear legal framework (Merone 2017).

Relatively speaking, the issue of Salafism remains on the margins of current debates on Tunisian politics. However, it is a central concern for the evolution of the country's relationship between religion and politics for several reasons. The official ban on Salafist discourses and practices that came into effect in the summer of 2013 led

to the retreat of many young people from various forms of political participation. While it is difficult to measure how large this contingent is, there is evidence to suggest that young people in Tunisia under 30 years of age are not as invested in elections and electoral politics as their counterparts in other states transitioning to democracy, such as South Africa in the early 1990s. For instance, the voter turnout for young people decreased 11 percentage points between Tunisia's 2011 and 2014 elections (Yerkes 2017). While many young Salafis might have other reasons not to participate in electoral politics, such as ideological ones, their marginalization and official exclusion from social and political activism nonetheless compounds the problem of low youth interest in Tunisia's formal political process. At the peak of Salafi mobilization in 2011 and 2012, up to 30,000 people—mostly young men—participated in the Kairouan annual congress of the largest Salafi movement in the country.

Similarly, democratic consolidation has yet to deal with the causes that led to the rise of Salafism in the first place. Salafism is considered both an expression of socio-economic malaise and a tool of revolutionary mobilization that has a far greater political dimension than one that is strictly religious or doctrinal. The majority of Salafis in Tunisia were active in Ansar al-Sharia, a Salafist movement with clear jihadi and revolutionary undertones that adapted to a transitional situation specific to Tunisia. Another movement, Political Salafism, emerged quickly in 2011 after



**While the narrative regarding the close relationship between mainstream Islamists and Salafis is certainly an important aspect of the transition to democracy in Tunisia, it tends to misrepresent the goals of both Ennahdha and the Salafis.**

the fall of Ben Ali and attempted to make inroads in parliament, but failed to mobilize enough supporters to gain any elected seats. A third movement, quietist Salafism (also referred to as scientific Salafism), built on the institutions and networks that had emerged in the later years of the Ben Ali regime, positioning itself as an intermediary between the state and revolutionary Salafism. Its success was modest, however, and revolutionary Salafis labeled quietist sheikhs and scholars as “Salafi lights” to suggest that they did not have a genuine attachment to a radical interpretation of the faith and the politics derived from it.

### THE SALAFISTS' AGENDA FOR POST-REVOLUTIONARY TUNISIA

The quietist form of Salafism that originated during Ben Ali's regime was tolerated by the authorities for two reasons: From an ideological standpoint, quietist Salafism favored the political status quo and did not constitute a challenge to the regime. From a more pragmatic perspective, the regime wanted to increase its religious legitimacy and respond to popular demands for a greater role of religion in society (Personal communication with former Ennahdha MP, March 2017; Zeghal 2013; Haugbølle 2015) without permitting a politicized form of it. Quietist Salafism is apolitical; therefore, it appealed to the Ben Ali regime. Similar decisions to tolerate and even encourage quietist Salafism were made in Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, and Algeria during the 2000s.

Historically, Salafism has been divided in terms of its relationship to institutional politics and how the goal of the Islamic state should be achieved (Wiktorowicz 2006). Revolutionary and politicized Salafi groups emerged in Tunisia in the aftermath of the general amnesty law<sup>3</sup> adopted on February 19, 2011. The new public freedoms, together with the return of Ennahdha to political prominence, represented an opportunity for Salafi groups to mobilize and play a long-denied public role through the creation of civil society associations, political parties, and individual initiatives (Cavatorta 2015). Salafis of all ideological

persuasions were motivated to act—to avoid passively witnessing what they perceived could be the descent of post-revolutionary Tunisia into a state based on un-Islamic democratic pillars and corrupt morals (Grami 2014). The Salafis' mobilization and activism reflected their ideological leanings. During the elected assembly's work to draft a new constitution, Salafis pushed their agenda for a post-revolutionary Tunisia: a redefinition of *tunisianité*—or national identity—that included a major role for Islam (Merone 2014). This would be achieved by recognizing sharia as the sole source of legislation in the new constitution: “we have the Quran and the *sunna* that give us an alternative: with our religion we can dominate the world, just like we used to in the past” (Merone 2013). In their vision, sharia would halt corruption and redistribute wealth: “where there is sharia, there is a complete program—no more divisions, injustice” (Marks 2013). Salafi groups used top-down (institutional changes) and bottom-up (societal changes) strategies similar to those employed by the more traditional Islamist movements during the 1980s and 1990s (Roy 1992). The main goal was the Salafization of society through *dawa* (proselytizing).

In the early stages of the transition to democracy, it seemed that the Salafis would handle “street politics” to generate support for a greater role of religion in guiding public policies, while Ennahdha would take care of “institutional politics” to lay the groundwork to legally take over the country. This was a popular interpretation of Islamist politics among secular, nationalist commentators and politicians (Sayah 2012). Yet it was a fundamental misreading of both the Salafis—particularly Ansar al-Sharia—and Ennahdha, as their relationship was much more complex and conflicted.

Initially, Salafis lacked political representation in the National Constituent Assembly because no Salafi party was registered to participate in the 2011 legislative elections, and no independent candidates from the government-legalized Jabhat Al-Islah<sup>4</sup> were elected. In the Salafis' search for a powerful ally against secular parties, it seemed that Ennahdha could fill the role, particularly through its

**Ennahdha was more committed to building democratic institutions than to maintaining its links with the Salafis, as Ennahdha had abandoned its radical Islamist agenda in the 1990s.**

more conservative and traditionalist wing represented by MPs such as Sadok Chourou and Habib Ellouze (International Crisis Group 2013). At the same time (according to a personal interview with a former Ennahdha MP), Ennahdha was trying to broaden its voter base and to delegate tasks it could not perform as a major, credible elected political party—tasks such as filling the streets with young men demanding “the impossible,” i.e., the creation of a sharia-based Islamic state (Cavatorta 2015). Accordingly, we observe that both Ennahdha and Salafis professing a range of ideologies had interests that coincided, and they worked together to an extent for what appear to be different ends. In other words, both ostensibly had a common objective (the Islamization of the state through sharia), seemed to belong to the same ideological family, and played a complementary role in post-revolutionary Tunisia. In reality, Ennahdha wanted as many votes and as much support as it could gather outside the assembly in order to negotiate from a position of strength with the elected representatives of secular ideologies, all the while being fully aware that the most radical Islamist demands would never be accepted by its prospective institutional partners. For its part, Ansar al-Sharia wanted institutional and political outcomes that were often at odds with the will of the majority of Tunisians and were ultimately unpalatable to Rachid Ghannouchi’s party.

Joint participation in various activities such as demonstrations, political meetings, Ansar al-Sharia gatherings, and religious conferences reinforced the perception of a close relationship between Salafis and Ennahdha. For example, a large demonstration on March 16, 2012, featured various Islamist actors: “political” Salafis from Jabhat Al-Islah (Zelin 2012b); Ennahdha members, including MPs Sahbi Atig and Habib Ellouze; representatives from the Tunisian Front of Islamic Associations; and quietist Salafis (Radio-Canada 2012; AFP 2012). Ghannouchi attended the founding congress of Jabhat Al-Islah; likewise, he attended two Ansar al-Sharia official gatherings, along with fellow party members Sadok Chourou and Habib Ellouze. The latter two were also present during a conference

featuring Mohamed Hassan, a controversial Egyptian preacher (Business News 2013). These examples underscore the fact that Salafis attempted to be closer to Ennahdha irrespective of whether they recognized the legitimacy of involvement in formal politics.

While the narrative regarding the close relationship between mainstream Islamists and Salafis is certainly an important aspect of the transition to democracy in Tunisia, it tends to misrepresent the goals of both Ennahdha and the Salafis. Ennahdha’s strategy of inclusion was based on the idea that Salafis should take part in the transitional process in order to moderate the Salafis’ discourses through interactions with political movements of different political persuasions (personal interview with a former member of Ennahdha’s politburo, March 2017) and to avoid their marginalization in society. Ennahdha considered dialogue to be the only way to correct the Salafis’ strict, narrow religious interpretations (Greenberg 2015). Ennahdha also believed that the marginalization of Salafism would represent a national security threat and that the conciliatory and pragmatic path Ennahdha followed during its political integration in the 1990s and 2000s was the best way forward. Ennahdha was more committed to building democratic institutions than maintaining its links with the Salafis, as Ennahdha had abandoned its radical Islamist agenda in the 1990s (Allani 2009; Cavatorta and Merone 2013) and had made it clear after the fall of Ben Ali that it would honor the agreement made with other opposition parties in October 2005 to participate in the construction of a liberal-democratic order in partnership with secular and nationalist movements equally opposed to Ben Ali’s rule.

Three reasons stand out for rejecting the idea that there was a united Islamic front of Ennahdha and the Salafis in opposition to the secularists. First, the preservation of Ennahdha’s organization was paramount for the vast majority of decision-makers within the party and a successful transition to democracy was the only way to guarantee it, particularly after the Egyptian military coup. Netterstrøm’s (2015) investigation of how the party’s leadership went about

**With time, it became clear that whatever links the Salafis had with Ennahdha would be severed once the latter announced its intention to refuse the insertion of sharia in the constitution draft, and that violent episodes attributed to Salafis would increase.**

**The radicalism of Salafism was marginalized in favor of a pragmatic approach to political change—but the success of the liberal-democratic institutions that Ennahdha played a significant part in creating has not led to improvements in Tunisia's socio-economic conditions.**

convincing ordinary members and activists of the necessity to drop the issue of sharia in the new constitution makes this clear. Second, ideological change had taken place within the party over time. It had become more moderate for years, and securing a smooth transition away from the Ben Ali regime had been a priority. The relative strength of the Salafis could be employed to put pressure on other parties during the negotiations over the text of the new constitution, but a successful transition to democracy with the party as one of its central actors was more of a priority than adhering to the radical Salafi agenda. Ennahdha's priorities and interest in governing can be seen in its participation in a grand coalition with the secular Nidaa Tounes party following the 2014 elections, despite the potential costs to Ennahdha. Third, Ennahdha represented a social class that had very little interest in radical and revolutionary change when it came to socio-economic issues (Merone 2014). This social class wanted to be integrated into the state and "share" in the project of national construction from which they had been excluded since Tunisia's independence from France in the 1950s. Like its political representative, Ennahdha, this middle-class social bloc had no interest in subverting the socio-economic order.

With time, it became clear that whatever links the Salafis had with Ennahdha would be severed once the latter announced its intention to refuse the insertion of sharia in the constitution draft, and that violent episodes attributed to Salafis would increase. In this complex situation, many within Ennahdha maintained a pragmatic approach, a moderate discourse, and a long-term vision (Personal interview with member of Ennahdha, March 2017) when it came to the Salafis. Some within the party had argued for Ennahdha to walk back from its position on sharia, and to instead push for its addition to the constitution because it could represent a potential political gain in the 2014 elections (Personal interview with former constituent Ennahdha MP, March 2017). However, the "costs" were deemed too high, i.e., a polarized society around pro- and anti-sharia contingents

(Guazzone 2013), including "the leftists, the Marxists, and the very secular elites" (Personal interviews with sitting Ennahdha MPs, March 2017). Such a move would also create a "red line" that its political partners, the Congrès pour la République (CPR)—a center-left secular political party—and Ettakatol, a social democratic political party, could not cross. Thus, the party's *shura*, or consulting council, issued a statement on March 26, 2012, confirming its commitment to preserve Article 1 of Tunisia's 1959 constitution as it stood. The article states that Islam is Tunisia's religion, but it does not mention that its precepts should be employed as a source of legislation.

For their part, the Salafis saw the refusal to insert sharia in the constitution as "giving nothing to them" (Personal interview with former Ennahdha MP, March 2017). This development, as anticipated, represented the breaking point in the relationship between the Salafis and Ennahdha. Indeed, it led to profound disappointment and frustration among Salafis toward Ennahdha because many considered the party to belong to a common Islamist front for the Islamization of state and society (Personal interview with former Ennahdha MP, March 2017). In addition, there existed a certain level of misunderstanding on the part of political actors and commentators as to what Salafis wanted and stood for. This was because the Salafis' ideological boundaries had not been clearly identified and Salafis themselves, for several reasons, had difficulty expressing—beyond easy sloganeering—what they wanted.

First, the complexity of the Salafi political landscape was underestimated in political circles in Tunisia and abroad. While some Salafis—the so-called *politicos*—disagreed with Ennahdha on the issue of sharia, they did not break entirely with institutional politics. Instead, they promoted their radical policy positions (such as the creation of a morality police) in the free market of ideas created during electoral campaigns, although they failed to elect a single representative.

Second, Ansar al-Sharia represented a social bloc that did not seek inclusion in the state. Instead, it called for the

dismantlement of the liberal-democratic institutional system being created because the group had never benefited from it, and would not do so if a compromise on the concept of *tunisianité* were to be reached through liberal-democratic institutions. A “continuation of the revolution through Salafism” found support in areas of the country that had always been marginalized and deprived of socio-economic opportunities (Lamloum and Ben Zina 2016).

In many ways, the relationship between the Salafis, in particular those linked to Ansar al-Sharia, and Ennahdha was doomed from the start. The vitriol following the ban on Ansar al-Sharia is testimony to that. Salafis began issuing several virulent critiques toward Ennahdha and its deputies when it became apparent in mid-2013 that Ansar al-Sharia’s legal status would be withdrawn and that Ennahdha would drop them in favor of consolidating its ties with Tunisian political actors committed to the new liberal-democratic order (Personal interview with current Ennahdha MP, March 2017). The Salafis’ scathing critiques recounted the numerous concessions Ennahdha had made to save the *troika* government<sup>5</sup> and former members of Ben Ali’s party. Such compromises collided with the Islamist mission, according to Salafis. Salafis also accused Ennahdha of being a puppet of the West and Israel (Personal interview with former Ennahdha MP, March 2017), focusing on its own interests as a “normal” political entity rather than on promoting Islamic values in politics (Boukhars 2017). Accompanying this criticism were public denunciations of Ennahdha members by Salafis—an attempt to delegitimize the religious credentials of Ennahdha’s ideology and suggest that the party’s progressive principles contradicted the values of Islam (Personal interview with current Ennahdha MP, March 2017). Finally, Ennahdha’s deputies were labeled atheists, traitors, and *kuffar* (nonbelievers) (Personal interviews with current Ennahdha MPs, March 2017). At the same time, Ennahdha escalated its anti-Salafi discourse to distance itself from Salafis, stating the latter were “intruders in Islam” and “extreme among extreme individuals” (Personal interview with current

Ennahdha MP, March 2017). Notwithstanding the criticism leveled against it, Ennahdha advocated for democracy and women’s rights, notably by campaigning for a Code of Personal Status that would establish equality between men and women in many areas, and against polygamy (Personal interview with current Ennahdha MP, March 2017).

## CONCLUSION

Contrary to the expectations of those who observe Tunisian politics, the relationship between Ennahdha and the Salafis was destined for failure. Religious and doctrinal differences between the two were not only profound, but they also masked a class conflict of sort. While Ennahdha finds support among the pious bourgeoisie, Salafis are strong in disenfranchised working class areas where citizens are much more interested in material gains and the subversion of the social order, as promised by the revolution. The radicalism of Salafism was marginalized in favor of a pragmatic approach to political change in the post-Ben Ali era—but the success of the liberal-democratic institutions that Ennahdha played a significant part in creating has not led to improvements in Tunisia’s socio-economic conditions. This failure threatens to undermine the consolidation of democracy and suggests that while Salafism might have disappeared from the public scene, many of the reasons why a large number of young people looked to it for revolutionary purity and inspiration have not. For the moment, Salafi revolutionary radicalism is manifested in isolated acts of political violence, but armed jihadism is unlikely to topple Tunisia’s democratic institutions. Of much greater concern is the widespread dissatisfaction with the lack of socio-economic progress, particularly among young people. Salafism offers different paths of mobilization, and a radical political agenda could re-emerge in the face of Tunisia’s current social and economic difficulties. In light of this, both domestic and international actors interested in the stability of the Tunisian regime should not take the defeat of Salafism for granted.

**Salafism offers different paths of mobilization, and a radical political agenda could re-emerge in the face of Tunisia’s current social and economic difficulties.**

## ENDNOTES

1. Salafism is an ultraconservative and literalist interpretation of Islam.
2. Ennahdha is the main Tunisian Islamist party. It has now become the party of Muslim democrats and has officially separated its religious and political activities.
3. Amnesty legislation came into effect in February 2011 and allowed for the release of all political prisoners incarcerated during the Ben Ali regime.
4. Jabhat Al-Islah is a Salafi party that opted to participate in democratic institutional politics.
5. The first post-Ben Ali elected government was a coalition of three parties—Ennahdha, Ettakatol, and CPR—commonly referred to as the *troika*.

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# ISSUE BRIEF **04.30.18**

## The Reconfiguration of Ennahdha's Recruitment Strategy in Tunisia

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Currently, Ennahdha presents itself as a conservative political party. In its 10th congress in June 2016, the party announced that it had adopted a specialization policy (*takhasus*) that formally separates its preaching and political activities. Islam is no longer considered to be a total political project as expressed in the slogan "*al islam din wa dawla*" ("Islam is religion and state"), but rather, a system of ethical values that guides the policy choices of Ennahdha in the economic, political, and social arenas.

This brief<sup>1</sup> will discuss Ennahdha's ideological renewal through the prism of recent changes in the party's recruitment procedures. Ennahdha membership has grown from an estimated 10,000 adherents in the 1990s to about 100,000 today for several reasons. The party ranks grew significantly following the end of Ben Ali regime, as the political costs of Ennahdha affiliation were no longer high. Likewise, the party has adopted a policy of openness (*infitah*) that removed various recruitment criteria that once limited its activist base. Given these changes, I ask the following: what are the effects of these changes on Ennahdha's party identity? How might such changes in recruitment practices affect party members' relationship with and loyalty to Ennahdha? In answering these questions, I will comparatively analyze Ennahdha's former and present-day recruitment procedures.

### THE FORMER RECRUITMENT PROCESS

At its inception in the early 1970s, Ennahdha's recruitment process featured an initiation phase as its central element. During this phase, religiosity was a primary concern for membership and a key dimension of a neophyte's identity. This phase consisted of three stages: 1) the circle stage (*halaqa*) corresponded to a period of initial religious learning activity; 2) the open cell stage (*osra maftouha*) was for political skills acquisition and activist identity-building; and 3) the closed cell (*osra moghlaqa*) stage featured integration into the group as a full member, with an oath of allegiance. These three stages—fundamental to the process of conversion to Ennahdha's Islamist ideology—touched on both an entry into the sacred and a desacralization of activist motivations.

There were two main paths in the initiation phase: preaching or political action. The supervisor (*mushrif*) assumed a critical role in this process; he was tasked with discovering a neophyte's skills and predilection for a religious or political path. While some activists worked in mosques and engaged in social action, others were active at college campuses and in student groups. Political activism became especially prevalent with the second generation of Ennahdha activists who had gained experience at university campuses throughout the 1980s. This distinction is also critical to better understand the contemporary divisions



**The Ennahdha party separated its preaching and political activities in 2016. Islam is now considered a system of ethical values that guides the party's policy choices in the economic, political, and social arenas.**

**Ennahdha as a political party will no longer oversee religious activities. The new policy is part of the movement's survival strategy in a new political context.**

within the party, i.e., to move beyond the idea of a simple dichotomy between radicals and moderates in Ennahdha. The training received by the older generation of members focused on their political-religious qualifications and the internalization of the group's motivation. It was up to the *murshid* to define the mission to which the activist would commit, to recognize the specific aptitude required to fulfill the mission, and to proceed with a specific form of social and cultural activism in order to uphold the group's Islamist ideology.

A key component of the initiation process was the notion of elevation (*istiqla*). This was intended to differentiate an Ennahdha initiate from the masses: "Our mission is to distinguish ourselves and to carry the flame for those lost in the meanders of the Earth and the labyrinths of deserts."<sup>2</sup> The initiate had to consider himself/herself superior by standing out from the masses, rejecting their values, and proving his/her distinction. The idea of elevation implied a total break with a society that was regarded as impious. This concept of society thus opens the way to a process of communalization in the Weberian sense—a subjective feeling of belonging to a distinctive community. In this regard, a separation from broader society reflects the prophet's exile (*hijra*) to Medina in 622, following conflicts with unbelievers in Mecca. This exile constitutes the core "mobilizing utopian construction" of the Muslim world, according to French historian Maxime Rodinson.<sup>3</sup> During the initial phase, the reference to the prophet's life served several functions: it allowed the neophyte to grasp the importance of action to transform the world, to undertake such actions and conform to the will of God, and to confer sacredness to the actions.

The context in which the early Ennahdha generations evolved necessitated the use of secrecy. Secrecy served a dual function: protection against repression under the regimes of Habib Bourguiba and Ben Ali, and the formation of forces capable of opposition. Secrecy also strengthens the demarcation between the insider and the outsider, thereby serving a valorization function. Knowing what the outsider does not is a source of pride and distinction

for the Islamist insider. Likewise, secrecy performs a group identification function. The exclusivism generated by secrecy implies a sense of belonging to a distinct group that is composed of qualified people united by their beliefs and ideology.

This cult of distinction—grounded in the principle of adherence to Islam and rooted in religious qualification—diminished over time in favor of the more material rewards generated by activism, such as official positions within the group or access to patronage.

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## A POLICY OF OPENNESS

The policy of openness (*al-infithah*) adopted by Ennahdha fundamentally altered the party's recruitment process. This policy is a direct consequence of its specialization policy. The core of the specialization policy is that Ennahdha as a political party will no longer oversee religious activities (i.e., preaching and sermons in mosques, or through civil society organizations). While members are free to participate in religious activities as individuals, any member holding an elected office or a leadership position within the party cannot simultaneously hold a leadership position within a religious organization or engage in preaching.

Many factors contributed to Ennahdha's adoption of the specialization policy. First, the main argument in favor of specialization was that a dictatorship—and the threat it posed to religious freedoms—was no longer in power. The Arab-Muslim identity was no longer in peril, as was the case under the Bourguiba and Ben Ali regimes. According to party officials,<sup>4</sup> Ennahdha's previous demands for the Islamization of state and society were the result of restrictions placed on political parties. However, re-Islamization is no longer pertinent given the renewed religiosity in Tunisia since the 2000s. Hence, Hamadi Jebali, a former Ennahdha leader, and head of government under the troika,<sup>5</sup> declared that he was delighted to see that Ennahdha's dream of lifting the ban on the veil was realized without the party's help. Indeed, the resurgence of religiosity in Tunisia began in the 2000s under the influence of Arab satellite television channels. Apparent signs of

this development include massive attendance at mosques and, as mentioned earlier, the wearing of the veil by women.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, while the 2014 constitution guarantees religious freedoms, it clearly states that Islam is the religion of the Tunisian state. As such, Ennahdha has access to the democratic process to influence policy choices, including those that counter the party's vision of Islam, according to party officials.

A second argument for specialization is that Ennahdha's current political challenge involves its ability to propose viable solutions to Tunisia's political and economic problems. Yet the responses and policies proposed and adopted by the party must also conform to Islam to the extent possible. A bill on Awqaf in October 2013 is a case in point.<sup>7</sup> Although the bill, which aimed to resurrect the institution of Awqaf, has not been adopted by the National Constituent Assembly (NCA), it remains a priority for Ennahdha because of its symbolic significance in Islamic law.<sup>8</sup> For Islamist activists who have long been immersed in Islamist ideology and for whom religion is a part of their identity, such symbolic acts of Islamic idealism will continue to be part of their political discourse.

Third, specialization policy is part of the movement's survival strategy in a new political context. While maintaining its presence in the social and religious fields, the movement protects itself from accusations that it is using Islam for electoral purposes.

### NEW ENTRY PROCEDURES: A DECREASE OF LOYALTY?

As explained earlier, party mobilization expanded in the mid-1980s. Recruitment and initiation procedures were relaxed due to the expansion of Ennahdha and its activist base. Members were integrated without always going through the first level of the organizational hierarchy. Nonetheless, social control mechanisms remained strong. The new entrants were supervised by their predecessors in the areas of ideological transformation, knowledge of Islamist doctrine, and appropriate social behavior. At the same time, the hardships suffered and

the sacrifices made for the Islamist cause contributed to an unflagging loyalty to the movement and a great sense of solidarity among its members.

The specialization policy fundamentally altered the party's recruitment process. Since the policy's adoption, Ennahdha's stated goal is to function only as a political party in which membership is no longer exclusive to those who share the same political-religious ethos. New members must, in principle, be exclusively interested in political work. This entails, then, the end of exclusivism, i.e., the policy of reserving entry into Ennahdha to those who have been initiated; it also creates the need to open the party to all who share Ennahdha's vision, whether Muslim or not. Indeed, political competition demands the broadening of the party's electoral base.

Membership in Ennahdha today follows conventional methods of political party recruitment. A prospective member need only apply for membership in order to obtain his/her membership card and gain voting rights within the party; nonetheless, an introduction by an existing member of the party remains *de rigueur*. The application for membership is only accepted if an Ennahdha member testifies to the character and integrity of the applicant. The new recruit must go through a probationary period of one year before he or she is eligible for positions of responsibility at the local level, and two years before he or she is eligible for positions at the central level. An academy primarily catering to young members has been set up to train new recruits. The trainers in the academy are Tunisian and foreign experts in communication and other skills, as opposed to being party activists. The religious component of recruitment has thus been abandoned in favor of training in areas such as communication, diplomacy, economics, political regimes, and electoral systems. Fifty-two members were involved in the first year of the program, which was launched in July 2017; the second class (February 2018) had around 200 people. New party members who joined between 2011 and 2017 were therefore not a part of the new training program. As a result, there is a great level of heterogeneity among party members and a shift toward the new

**Compared to older members, new members are less intensely engaged in party activities. The fully committed activist who sacrificed his private life and studies, and who took risks for the Islamist cause, has given way to the distant activist who does not hesitate to turn his back on the party at the slightest disagreement.**

**While the elders still dominate the party and have managed to maintain control of it, new members are bound to eventually become the party majority and eventually overtake the decision-making positions within the party.**

members' ideas of what the party is and should stand for. Indeed, some discomfort is felt among the older members, especially those who entered the party with the ambition to assume positions of power or to benefit from the political protection that a party in power could offer. Due to the recruitment changes, some view Ennahdha as a new Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD)—a party to distribute aid, patronage, and favors of all kinds.

Compared to older members, new members are less intensely engaged in party activities. The fully committed activist who sacrificed his private life and studies, and who took risks for the Islamist cause has given way to the distant activist who does not hesitate to turn his back on the party in the case of the slightest disagreement, and who voices dissent or only participates in elections. This shift reflects not only societal changes but also a weakening of the group's solidarity and attachment to the cause. Disengagement, therefore, has become easier; shared experiences that once provoked excitement or were sources of pain no longer define Ennahdha membership. One member noted:

*If I am in conflict with one of the brothers [the older ones], it will not alter our relationship because there are strong links between us. However, the only link between us and the new member is the membership card. We have no idea if he understands or not our ideal Islamic repository [shared values and practices].<sup>9</sup>*

## WHAT LIES AHEAD

Despite radical changes to Ennahdha recruitment, membership is not entirely open. The first wave of new Ennahdha entrants was primarily composed of movement sympathizers, especially those related to an existing member of Ennahdha who were unable to join during the Ben Ali regime; however, this wave lacked social diversity. Ennahdha continues to recruit from the conservative, petite bourgeoisie and the lower socioeconomic classes, both of which mirror the traditional Islamist profile in Tunisia. The conservatism cultivated by the middle class and those

who live in rural areas, and which most Islamists support, favors the return of traditional values such as modesty, gender segregation, and chastity. As a result, Ennahdha's newly proclaimed conservative party identity is likely to resonate among new entrants. Yet neither the party's new identity nor its strategy satisfies everyone within the party. A party official stated:

*For the moment, we are not yet able to recruit members or to collect votes in a district like yours [District of Menzah],<sup>10</sup> either because we are seen as too conservative or because we have not done enough to achieve it ... We did not conduct a rational and pragmatic reading of the electoral map. We risk losing everything if we seek to broaden our electoral base by addressing very different groups and using contradictory discourses.<sup>11</sup>*

Moreover, a kind of ostracism still exists within Ennahdha. For instance, a smoker will face discrimination in a subtle way, even if the party rules do not sanction exclusionary practices based on personal behavior. Despite higher levels of heterogeneity among the rank and file, informal control over the morality of new members and the selection process of party officials leads to a relatively homogenous and more conservative party leadership.

While significant changes have taken place in the party's recruitment strategy, the extent of their impact—as far as Ennahdha's move away from political Islam is concerned—remains unclear. Although the party has instituted measures to signal changes, it remains timid and often imbued in ambivalence. This ambivalence is particularly visible in the conflict between the party's admittance of non-Muslims and non-Islamists on one hand, and its emphasis on Islamic references and strong morality on the other hand. It leads us to believe that the changing political and social context in Tunisia necessitated the newly instituted changes, especially following Ennahdha's lackluster performance in the seat of power.

If we take seriously the assertion by Tunisian political and intellectual elites that the specialization policy is merely a decoy to allow Ennahdha to continue functioning

in the religious sphere, the strategy appears to be unsustainable because the transformations at work in party recruitment will alter the party's activist base in the long-term. While the elders still dominate the party and have managed to maintain control, new members are bound to eventually become the party majority and eventually overtake the decision-making positions. This strategy could portend a radical transformation of Ennahdha into a secular party in the long-term unless it manages to do one of two things: 1) maintain a bridge between members from different generations so that older members can transfer their vision for Islamic activism to the younger members, or 2) retain control over preaching and the social and charitable activism of its base. Provided that the party has anchored itself politically and socially in the specialization policy, the odds for the successful implementation of either of these two options remain low.

## ENDNOTES

1. This brief is based on the data produced by a qualitative survey conducted between 2006 and 2013 with members of Ennahdha for my Ph.D. thesis. See Maryam Ben Salem, "Le militantisme en contexte répressif. Cas du mouvement islamiste tunisien [Militantism in a Repressive Context. The Case of the Tunisian Islamist Movement]," Ph.D. thesis in political science under the direction of Daniel Gaxie, Panthéon-Sorbonne Université, 2013. It is also based on the preparatory work for a new research project I am engaged in (interviews conducted in January 2018 with eight leaders of Ennahdha).

2. Sayyid Qutb (our translation). سيد قطب، نحو مجتمع إسلامي، القاهرة، مصر، الطبعة العاشرة، دار الشروق 1993م، ص 12-13.

3. Maxime Rodinson, *L'islam: politique et croyance* (Paris: Fayard, 1993).

4. Personal interviews with Abdelhamid Jelassi, Mohamed Gueloui, Ridha Driss, Ridha Barouni, Fethi Ayadi, and Ridha Saidi, January 2018.

5. Troika refers to the coalition government formed by the Ennahdha,

Congress for the Republic, and Ettakatol parties in December 2011.

6. Maryam Ben Salem, "Le voile islamique en Tunisie. La réalisation de soi entre traditionalisme et modernité," *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée REMMM* 128 (2010): 61-77. Maryam Ben Salem et François Gauthier, "Téléprédication et port du voile en Tunisie," *Social Compass, Special issue: Religion in a Consumer Society*, 58 no. 3 (2011): 323-330.

7. The institution of Awqaf was liquidated in the aftermath of independence. It is defined as "Holding certain property and preserving it for the confined benefit of certain philanthropy and prohibiting any use or disposition of it outside that specific objective." See M. Kahf, "Waqf: A Quick Overview," February 3, 2015, retrieved from kahf.net at [http://monzer.kahf.com/papers/english/WAQF\\_A\\_QUICK\\_OVERVIEW.pdf](http://monzer.kahf.com/papers/english/WAQF_A_QUICK_OVERVIEW.pdf).

8. Personal interview with Ridha Saidi, who was in charge of Ennahdha's planning and studies section, January 2018.

9. Author interview with Mohamed Gueloui, January 2018.

10. In the 2011 and 2014 elections, Ennahdha fared poorly in the District of Menzah, in the Tunis Governorate.

11. Personal interview with Abdelhamid Jelassi, January 2018.

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