

Tunisia's Ennahda: Rethinking Islamism in the context of ISIS and the Egyptian coup

WORKING PAPER

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SUMMARY: A series of regional and local challenges—including the rise of Salafi-jihadism, the 2013 coup in Egypt, and local suspicions over its aims—have prompted Tunisia's Ennahda party to narrow its range of political maneuver and rethink the parameters of its own Islamism. Ennahda has assumed a defensive posture, casting itself as a long-term, gradualist project predicated on compromise, a malleable message of cultural conservatism, and the survival of Tunisia's democratic political system.

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Since its January 2011 revolution, Tunisia has carved out a special status as the first – albeit fragile – genuine Arab democracy. Regional tumult, however, has repeatedly reverberated in the country. Both the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) and Egypt's July 2013 coup had rippling effects, emboldening “democratically disloyal” actors and demands inside Tunisia which threatened to destabilize its nascent democracy.¹ Neighbouring Libya's descent into near-statelessness and Gulf actors' willingness to bankroll anti-democratic projects in the region have importantly compounded these challenges.

The rise of ISIS and the coup in Egypt presented special obstacles for Ennahda, the center-right Tunisian Islamist party that led a coalition government from October 2011 to January 2014. A Tunisian religious party that emerged from the Muslim Brotherhood (*Ikhwan*) school of Islamism, Ennahda had never held power. Rather, it was banned in Tunisia for over twenty years prior to the revolution. When Ennahda re-entered Tunisian politics in 2011, many Tunisians – particularly secularly oriented critics of political Islam – found its identity obscure and its democratic commitments suspect. The tendency, in both local and Western press, to label religiously oriented actors as diverse as Salafi jihadis, Boko Haram, the Egyptian Brotherhood, and Ennahda as “Islamists” generated additional confusion regarding Ennahda's identity and aims. As violent jihadism rose in Tunisia throughout 2011 and 2012, and as the Muslim Brotherhood won victory in Egypt, many Tunisians predicted that Ennahda, an assumedly transnationally linked Islamist actor, would actively aid – or, at the very least, tacitly abet – the importation and popularization of jihadism and Egyptian-style Islamism in Tunisia.

This chapter examines how regional developments, specifically the rise of ISIS and Egypt's 2013 coup, interacted with local challenges, such as widespread suspicion, to affect Ennahda's political behaviour. It argues the primary effect of these developments forced Ennahda into a more defensive posture, narrowing its range of political manoeuvre. This effect was particularly pronounced on issues related to revolutionary justice, such as the proposed electoral exclusion (i.e. lustration law), floated between 2012 and 2014, which Ennahda and its coalition partners had edged extremely close to passing. The chapter considers the effects of such constricted manoeuvre for Ennahda internally and for Tunisia's transition more broadly. It concludes by positing that Ennahda itself is “rethinking Islamism” as a local and long-term project predicated on canny compromise, a malleable message of cultural conservatism, and the survival of a democratic – if not necessarily secular-liberal – political system. Whether this recasting of Islamism in process-dependent, defensive terms will enable Ennahda to regain the dynamism of a principled movement, or to expand beyond its relatively static historical base, remains uncertain.

A Context of Suspicion

Ennahda is a religiously rooted party with origins in the Ikhwan-inspired *sahwa*, or spiritual revivalism that swept the MENA region during the 1970s. During the 1970s and early 80s, when Ennahda was just beginning, it brought together conservatively oriented Tunisians – often with familial roots in the country's interior and marginalized regions – who felt disillusioned by and

¹ For a discussion of democratic loyalty, semi-loyalty, and disloyalty see Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan, *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes*, (Johns Hopkins: University Press, 1979).

excluded from the secularly flavoured authoritarianism of presidents Habib Bourguiba (1956-1987) and Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali (1987-2011).²

Bourguiba and Ben Ali, in turn, sensed a political threat in Ennahda's religious rejoinders, and sought to vilify the group as extremist and even terrorist in nature. After aborting Ennahda-affiliated independents' attempts to contest the 1989 elections, Ben Ali reneged on promises to initiate a democratic '*changement*' in Tunisia. Instead he reversed course, cracking down on opposition activists and using electoral lists to round up party members and their families. Many *Nahdawis* (Ennahda members) fled the country for exile, mainly to Western European countries. Thousands more who remained in Tunisia were subjected to various forms of regime-sponsored abuse in following decades, including blacklisting from employment and educational opportunities and police harassment which sometimes involved sexual abuse and torture.

Following Tunisia's revolution, Ennahda re-entered Tunisian politics amidst deep suspicions that its democratic claims were not credible. Ennahda did follow through on some core pre-electoral promises, such as not declaring its support for a presidential candidate in the 2011 and 2014 elections and entering into cross-ideological government coalitions. After winning a 39 per cent plurality in Tunisia's October, 2011 elections, it formed a cross-ideological coalition government known as the 'Troika' with two secularly oriented parties, Congress for the Republic (CPR) and Ettakatol. Such steps did little, though, to dissuade many secularists' suspicions that Ennahda – which claimed to be a democratic, Tunisian party – was actually an illiberal, imported franchise of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood which aimed to quite literally "re-Orient" Tunisia towards the conservative Arab world and away from its relative openness to Europe and regionally progressive stances on women's rights.

Not a Model: the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood

In summer, 2011 I conducted open-ended interviews with more than eighty Ennahda leaders, grassroots members, and party supporters. I asked seventy-two of those *Nahdawis* what kind of Islamist party, or Islamic model of governance, Ennahda aspired to emulate. To my surprise at the time, not a single respondent listed the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood as an inspiring example. Very few *Nahdawis* even mentioned the Egyptian Brotherhood unless specifically prompted to do so. The vast majority of respondents said Turkey's AK Parti, which they perceived at the time as representing a winning combination of piety, prosperity, and democratic credibility, represented the model most relevant for Ennahda.³ Others said Tunisia would carve out its own model, possibly taking inspiration from the German Christian Democrats or Turkey's AK Parti. Most appeared unfamiliar with smaller regional Islamist parties, such as Morocco's Justice and Development Party (PJD) and characterized theocratically oriented regimes in Saudi Arabia and Iran as dangerously hypocritical models to avoid.

"What about the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood?" I asked Yesmin Masmoudi, a 24 year-old Ennahda activist who volunteered at the party's youth wing in Sfax. "Ennahda took inspiration

² See Susan Waltz

³ For more on Ennahda's perception of AK Parti, see Monica Marks, "Erdogan Comes to Tunisia," *Foreign Policy*, June 6, 2013 and Oguzhan Goksel, "Perceptions of the Turkish Model in Post-Revolutionary Tunisia," *Turkish Studies* 15 no. 3 (2014).

from al-Banna and other *Ikhwan* [Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood] leaders over the years – can they be a model today?” She shook her head and smiled, waving a contradictory hand in the air. “Ask anyone in Ennahda. We are more advanced than the Ikhwan. We look to the Turkish model... modern and Muslim at the same time.”⁴ Ennahda president Rached Ghannouchi, though more diplomatic in his wording, avoided mentioning the Egyptian Brotherhood and similarly played up the Turkish model: “AK Parti will gradually make Turkey a more Muslim country,” he said. “Through education, building the economy, and diversifying the media. That’s our model—not law. Make people love Islam. Convince, don’t coerce them.”⁵

Nahdawis at all levels of the party tended to cast Ennahda as the enlightened cousin to the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood’s more recalcitrant older uncle. “We are related, yes, and we continue to be inspired by some of their ideas, but also we have our own ideas... and we have been moving forward for a long time,” said Said Ferjani, a Nahdawi leader whom I interviewed at the party’s national headquarters. “We get our colour [character] from Tunisia, which is often more open [than Egypt].”⁶

Whereas Ennahda’s leadership saw Turkey’s AK Parti and, to a lesser degree, Germany’s Christian Democracy, as symbolically successful examples to emulate, it felt the Muslim Brotherhood could sometimes use Tunisian Islamists’ advice. “In Egypt the Ikhwan made the worst decision – they decided to govern alone,” said Osama Essaghir, a young Ennahda MP and Shura Council member.⁷

One president, all alone with the powers... That was very unwise. The day after Morsi won the election, Sheikh Rached [Ghannouchi] flew to Egypt for one reason, just to tell Morsi one thing: do *not* govern alone.⁸

Long Termism

In making the case to share power, Ghannouchi and other Ennahda leaders frequently invoked the example of Algeria in 1990 and 1991, where the Islamist Salvation Front (FIS)’s victory in municipal and the first round of parliamentary elections spooked Algeria’s military regime. The regime then aborted the elections and initiated a broad crackdown on Islamists, which sparked a civil war that lasted over a decade and claimed as many as 200,000 lives. The lesson Ennahda leaders extracted from this experience was that a long-termist politics of gradualism (*el-tedruj*) was advisable, especially at moments of democratic transition. Prior to Tunisia’s 2011 elections for a Constituent Assembly, Ghannouchi pledged that Ennahda would rule in coalition – even if it was elected by an outright majority. “Our priority is to participate... one party should not govern alone. A party alone cannot face these [transitional, post-authoritarian] challenges.”⁹

In my interviews with Ennahda leaders throughout 2011 to 2013, feelings of frustration with the

⁴ Yesmin Masmoudi in discussion with the author, August 7, 2011.

⁵ Rached Ghannouchi in discussion with the author, August 22, 2011.

⁶ Author interview, July 5, 2011.

⁷ The 150 member Shura Council is the highest regularly sitting body in Ennahda. It is intended to be a representative institution in which the party debates and decides positions on important issues via a one person, one vote scheme.

⁸ Osama Essaghir in discussion with the author, March 20, 2013.

⁹ Rached Ghannouchi in discussion with the author, August 22, 2013.

Muslim Brotherhood often surfaced. “They are sacrificing a major opportunity to show that Islam and democracy are compatible,” said one member of Ennahda’s *maktab tanfidhi* (executive committee). “They are not us, but this will hurt us if they keep on.”¹⁰ On June 4, 2013, Rached Ghannouchi delivered a speech in Cairo, warning against “democracy of the majority.” “A balance of power should be maintained,” he said. “Any society is diverse, and so we have to accept this diversity or face... conflict and chaos.”¹¹

On July 3, 2013, when Mohamed Morsi was overthrown in a coup and replaced by field marshal Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, Nahdawis were outraged by what they perceived as the anti-democratic overthrow of a democratically elected president. Few in Ennahda’s leadership, though, were truly surprised. They were shocked, however, by the massacre at Rab’a Adawiya in Cairo, where approximately 1,000 people were killed and thousands more injured, most of them Muslim Brotherhood supporters.¹² The United States’ and European Union’s tepid response to the coup reminded Ennahda leaders of the power the pre-Arab Spring paradigm – which prized authoritarian stability over democracy – still held in many Western capitals. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates hustled to bankroll the al-Sisi regime, pledging billions in loans.¹³ This increased feelings of isolation and fragility in Ennahda, whose leaders saw Tunisia as the lone democratic holdout in a region whose winds were blowing in a concerted counter-revolutionary direction.

Nahdawis who had expressed strong reservations about the Muslim Brotherhood in interviews with me between 2011 and 2013 seemed more sympathetic and less inclined to criticize following the coup, and especially in the wake of Rab’a. Many began wearing yellow Rab’a stickers and pins to demonstrate their solidarity with the victims. Despite its leadership’s poor decisions in power, Nahdawis felt the Brotherhood did not deserve the coup or the crackdown. Many said that Rab’a reminded them of the oppression they and their families experienced under Ben Ali, particularly during the 1990s, and made them fear a potential reversal might be possible in Tunisia, too.

“Our Children?” Ennahda’s Early Approach to Salafi Jihadism

The Islamic State did not declare itself as such until June, 2014. Although an estimated 3,000 Tunisians ended up fighting for ISIS, they were not described – by themselves or others – as ISIS fighters when the bulk of them set out from towards al-Sham (Syria) between 2011 and 2013.¹⁴ Most described themselves simply as Salafi jihadis, or as members of Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia or other loose groupings of jihadis, often comprised primarily of young people but headed by older, more hardened recruiters.

The young people who drove Tunisia’s post-revolutionary Salafi jihadi “mouvance” tended to

¹⁰ Ennahda executive committee member in discussion with the author, December 18, 2012.

¹¹ See Nadeen Shaker, “In Cairo, Ghannouchi Warns Against ‘Democracy of the Majority,’” *Ahram Online*, June 4, 2013.

¹² See Human Rights Watch, “All According to Plan: the Rab’a Massacre and Mass Killings of Protesters in Egypt,” August 12, 2013.

¹³ See Lee Jae-Won, “Saudi Arabia and UAE to Lend Egypt up to 8 billion,” *Reuters*, July 9, 2013.

¹⁴ The figure of 3,000 comes from Tunisia’s Ministry of Interior. Though this figure has been widely cited, how the Interior Ministry, a historically unreliable source of information in Tunisia, arrived at these numbers remains unclear.

hail chiefly, but not entirely, from socio-economically marginalized backgrounds.¹⁵ Both male and female Salafis often aspired to fight against Bashar al-Assad in Syria. They regarded such a mission as both exciting and honorable, a chance to liberate one's Muslim brothers and sisters from the yoke of al-Assad's brutality as a brave freedom fighter. As young jihadis from around the world flocked to Syria and glossily produced jihadi recruitment videos began circulating more widely, young Tunisians who identified with the Salafi jihadi trend saw a future in Syria-bound Salafi extremism. The movement began developing an attractive 'start-up' quality, heightened, of course, when ISIS declared itself as a worldwide caliphate and began gobbling up swathes of territory in Syria and Iraq.¹⁶

Many Tunisians, Nahdawis included, were not entirely sure what to make of these young Salafi jihadis when they burst on the scene in 2011. Ennahda was familiar with and, prior to its politicized rebirth as the Islamic Tendency Movement in 1981, relatively close to quietist Salafism (*Salafiyya 'Almiyya*). But the newer trend of *Salafiyya jihadiyya* (Salafi jihadism), spearheaded by aggressive, sometimes violent young people who preached loudly and publically, frequently harassed women they regarded as inappropriately dressed, and sometimes attacked Sufi shrines bewildered Ennahda.

Early on, in 2011 and 2012, as young Salafi jihadis began expressing themselves in the public square, Ennahda's leaders tended to them with a kind of puzzled pity. Many regarded Salafi youths as misguided young victims of Ben Ali's economic corruption and religious oppression who needed both socio-economic and spiritual outreach.¹⁷ Ennahda held Bourguiba and especially Ben Ali accountable for creating the Salafi jihadi trend in Tunisia. Because Bourguiba had side-lined the Zaytouna (Tunisia's historic center of religious learning, similar to Egypt's al-Azhar) and Ben Ali had vehemently suppressed moderate Islamists and weakened the quality of Arabic language and religious education in public schools, a whole generation of young people had – they argued – grown up with no locally legitimate model of religiosity. Many in Ennahda felt that this dearth of religious knowledge created an educational void that rendered young Tunisians vulnerable to Wahhabi-inspired Salafi literalism. Nahdawis tended to regard such literalism as simplistic and inimical to what they described as Tunisia's tradition of Zaytouna-oriented reformism. Suffocating under Ben Ali's dictatorship and with few other resources, marginalized young people – in search of cultural authenticity and desperate for meaning in their lives – would then log onto YouTube to watch extremist Gulf preachers espouse violent views. This tended to be Ennahda's narrative accounting for the rise of Salafi jihadism in 2011-2012.

The antidote to this religious vulnerability, Ennahda argued, laid in reactivating locally legitimate sources of religious knowledge and scholarship. This meant reviving the Zaytouna, improving religious education in schools, and engaging in religiously oriented civil society outreach – re-

¹⁵ For more on Tunisian jihadi Salafism, see the work of Fabio Merone, particularly Fabio Merone and Francesco Cavatorta, "Salafist Mouance and Sheikh-ism in the Tunisian Democratic Transition" (Working Papers in International Studies, Dublin City University, 2012). See also Monica Marks, "Youth Politics and Tunisian Salafism: Understanding the Jihadi Current," *Mediterranean Politics* 18 no. 1 (2013).

¹⁶ I owe the observation on ISIS's "start-up" appeal to Quinn Meacham, who has called ISIS "the most successful start-up in the Middle East." See Meacham, "How Much of a State is the Islamic State?" in POMEPS Studies, *Islamism in the IS Age*, March 17, 2015.

¹⁷ See Monica Marks, "Ennahda's Rule of Engagement," *Sada*, September 2012.

educating wayward young jihadis in proper, moderate Tunisian Islam. The other half of the answer, Ennahda suggested, rested in political inclusion and socio-economic development. Ennahda leaders hoped young Salafi jihadis would support political parties, such as a clutch of Salafi parties formed in 2011 and 2012, including Hizb al-Asala (the Authenticity Party) and Jabhat al-Islah (the Reform Front). Nahdawi leaders believed strongly in the inclusion-moderation hypothesis, and thought political participation of Salafi jihadis would help them integrate and adopt more pragmatic views. Partially because of their own history of religious activism and oppression, many were reluctant to take a harshly securitized approach to Salafi jihadis in Tunisia. Engagement, dialogue, Islamic re-education and socio-political inclusion, they felt, represented the best options for moving young Salafis toward more moderate views.

This approach was famously reflected in a controversial video, likely recorded in spring, 2012, but leaked in October 2012, in which Rached Ghannouchi addressed a group of young Salafis. In the video, Ghannouchi entreats them to move slowly, taking time to consolidate their gains lest –as in Algeria in 1991 and Tunisia in 1989 – the speed of their advancement spooks opponents. “We all went through the same and we suffered,” he says.

Now you want to have a TV [station], radio [station], schools, and invite preachers. Why are you rushing things? ...Do you think what we achieved cannot be taken away? This is what we thought when we were in Algeria in the nineties... it turns out we misjudged the situation and went backwards.

To the young Salafi jihadis they were trying to reach, though, Ennahda's “*bishwaya bishwaya*” (slowly, slowly) approach often seemed patronizing and paternalistic. “They constantly refer to us as their ‘children’ and try to tell us how we should behave,” said Houda, a 24 year-old student who identified as Salafi jihadi and a member of Ansar al-Sharia.

Be calm, our children. Go slowly, they say. But all their going slowly hasn't brought any results. They gave up sharia, they listen to the West... I don't see what makes them so Islamic. They use lies to manipulate people just like any other party. Maybe they should be listening to us! We're going to make a change.¹⁸

Houda's mother and father, though not active in any Ennahda structures, supported the party and said they voted for it in the 2011 elections. Both were confused by their daughter's choice to wear the niqab, which she donned in February 2011. They discouraged her from attending Ansar al-Sharia events, such as *daawa* (preaching) tents in which she and other young women would distribute conservative religious pamphlets to passersby. Houda was one of eighteen Salafi jihadi youths, mostly women, whom I interviewed in-depth throughout 2012 and 2013, sometimes having meals and staying over at their homes. Eleven of these eighteen young people had parents who identified with, but were not active in, Ennahda. Most families came from poorer urban or rural areas, and none of the Nahdawi parents held university degrees.

Though these parents did not represent core Ennahda leaders and activists, their identification with Ennahda's brand of gradualist Islamism, and simultaneous confusion with their children's

¹⁸ Houda (a pseudonym), a female Salafi student in conversation with the author, August 10, 2012.

preference for Salafi jihadism, highlighted the presence of a stark generational divide. Ennahda leaders' feeling that they had a special responsibility to talk Salafi jihadi youths down, their reluctance to employ brass-knuckled security measures against these young people, and their tendency to talk about them as "children" who went astray, were all inflected by this generational dynamic which sometimes also manifested itself within families.

Crackdown and (Re)securitization

Throughout 2012 and 2013, acts of Salafi jihadi-oriented violence intensified. The September 2012 attack on the American Embassy and neighboring American International School in Tunis, followed by the two political assassinations of 2013 – acts of violence planned and perpetrated by Salafi-oriented groups – significantly increased the political costs of maintaining a soft-touch, inclusion-driven approach to Salafi jihadism.¹⁹ In April 2013 Ennahda declared Ansar al-Sharia, the largest and most popular Salafi jihadi group, a terror organization. In May 2013 the Ennahda-led coalition went head to head in what has been termed a "public game of chicken" with Ansar al-Sharia, which sought to hold a large public conference in Kairouan, a city approximately three hours south of Tunis.²⁰ The government won.

Still, for a large segment of the Tunisian public, as well as many scholars and analysts, Ennahda's response had been too little too late. The party was roundly criticized for adopting a "slow and ambiguous" approach to Salafi jihadism.²¹ Its perceived softness on Salafi jihadism was heavily criticized by Nidaa Tunis, a party driven primarily by leftists, business elites, and officials from the Bourguiba and Ben Ali regimes. In the autumn, 2014 elections, Nidaa Tunis campaigned to victory in both parliamentary and presidential elections on promises to govern as capable *rijal al-dawla* (statesmen) who would restore security and *haybat al-dawla* (state prestige) after years of Troika mismanagement.

Since cracking down on Ansar al-Sharia, Ennahda has tended to follow a securitized approach to Salafi jihadism. Nahdawis I have interviewed on the subject express discomfort with ongoing police brutality in Tunisia, as well as the re-introduction of certain Ben Ali-era police practices including forced registrations at police stations and the stationing of plain-clothes police officers in popular and pedestrian areas. Such practices most frequently target young people in poor neighborhoods, particularly those sporting visible markers of Salafi conservatism (such as beards and niqabs). Though Nahdawis privately criticized these ongoing trends, they also said the rise of violent Salafi jihadism locally, embedded in the broader regional context of ISIS and transnational jihadi terrorism, makes voicing objection to such security measures difficult. Following the Bardo museum attack of March 2015, which killed twenty two and injured more than fifty persons, Ennahda immediately released a statement voicing its support for a new anti-terrorism draft bill which permits extended incommunicado detention and weakens due process

¹⁹ Leftist politician Chokri Belaid was assassinated on February 6, 2013, and Arab nationalist politician Mohamed Brahmi was assassinated on July 25, 2013.

²⁰ See John Thorne, "Tunisia shuts down medieval city to prevent Salafi demonstrations," *Christian Science Monitor*, May 20, 2013.

²¹ See Rory McCarthy, "Protecting the Sacred: Tunisia's Islamist Movement Ennahda and the Challenge of Free Speech," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 42, no. 4 (2015).

protections for terrorism suspects.²² “If we say anything against this law, people will conclude that we support the Salafis ideologically,” said one member of Ennahda’s Shura Council. “Then we’ll be back where we were in 2011... that’s too big a risk.”²³

The Bardo Crisis

In late July 2013, these twin regional developments – the rise of violent jihadism in Syria and Iraq, coupled with the coup against Mohamed Morsi – intersected to send major shockwaves through Tunisia’s transition.

Dissatisfaction with the Troika government had been brewing since it assumed office in late 2011. For Tunisians assessing their own living situations, reality often fell disappointingly short of revolutionary expectations. By mid-2013 unemployment rates remained stubbornly high, few visible infrastructure employments could be found, corruption and police impunity continued, and terrorism seemed on the rise. The fragile security situation – compounded by suspicions that Ennahda’s Islamist identity made it ideologically sympathetic to, if not actively supportive of, Salafi jihadism – played a major role in provoking opposition to the coalition which also found popular roots in these broader-based grievances.

Opposition figures in the leftist front, Jebha Chaabia, and the unelected opposition party, Nidaa Tunis, characterized Ennahda as incompetent and retrograde group of outsiders whose attempt to import Ikhwani Islamism from the east had no place in indigenous Tunisian culture. Both groups sought to associate Ennahda with the failures of Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood, and held it responsible for coddling jihadi terrorists in Tunisia. Jebha Chaabia, which lost one of its MPs, Chokri Belaid, to a jihadi-perpetrated assassination on February 6, 2013 held Ennahda especially responsible for his death.

The success of Egypt’s *Tamarrod* (Rebellion) movement, which originally sought to force Morsi to call early elections but ended up sparking the July 3, 2013 coup that toppled him from power, emboldened critical opposition actors in Tunisia. These included secular critics of Ennahda who formed a copycat Tunisian *Tamarrod* movement, along with the parties Nidaa Tunis and Jebha Chaabia. Figures in these parties, including Nidaa Tunis leader Beji Caid Essebsi, had been denouncing the Troika government as illegitimate since late 2012, as it became clear the Troika would be unable to fulfill its pre-election pledge to complete a constitution and begin arranging new elections within a one-year timeline (by October 23, 2012).²⁴ Following the July 3 coup, which Essebsi called Egypt’s “second revolution” (*al-thawra al-thaniya*), he and other critics began redoubling calls for Ennahda and its Troika partners to cede government to an appointed group of unspecified, supposedly apolitical technocrats.

Nidaa Tunis had another motivation to capitalize on the Egyptian coup. On June 28, 2013, all three Troika parties – Ennahda, CPR, and Ettakatol – unanimously voted in favor of an electoral exclusion, i.e. lustration law at a general debate in the Constituent Assembly. This law would have banned former RCD members, including Beji Caid Essebsi, from running in Tunisia’s 2014

²² See Human Rights Watch, “Tunisia: Flaws in Anti-terrorism Draft Bill,” April 8, 2015.

²³ Author interview with Ennahda Shura Council member, November 4, 2015.

²⁴ See Monica Marks, “Tunisia in Turmoil,” *Foreign Policy*, July 26, 2013.

elections. This represented a special threat to Nidaa Tunis, which benefitted from RCD money and manpower. The proposed lustration law served to create coup-friendlier constituencies amongst Nidaa Tunis leaders and other incumbent-oriented businessmen and politicians who sensed profit in a return to the status quo ante.

Despite the rise of a relatively small Tamarrod movement in Tunisia, and the rhetorical support Essebsi and other opposition leaders lent to a soft (i.e. politically pressured, rather than violently forced) coup, such efforts did not enjoy the backing of a large-scale protest movement. That all changed on July 25, 2013 when a second politician, Mohamed Brahmī – also an MP in Jebha Chaabia – was assassinated. His assassination threw a match into a pre-existing powder keg of tension. In essence, it transformed a tense situation – in which Ennahda's cousin party had just been toppled in Egypt and jihadi-perpetrated violence was once again taking center stage – into a transition-threatening moment. Thousands of protesters streamed nightly into Bardo square, directly outside the Constituent Assembly, calling for the government to resign. Ennahda balked, not wanting to cede what it considered democratically attained power to a nebulous group of Nidaa-friendly technocrats who may or may not have derailed the transition. Nidaa Tunis, for its part, drew on discourses used in the anti-Morsi protests, claiming that, though unelected, their party possessed “*shera'iya al-shery'a*” (street legitimacy), manifested by the thousands of protesters flocking to Bardo. For weeks during August, 2013, Ennahda and Nidaa Tunis rallied competing groups of protesters to gather in the capital, vying over both political power and competing notions of legitimacy – electoral vs. street-based.

A protracted National Dialogue process mediated by Tunisia's powerful trade union, UGTT, and three other non-governmental groups ultimately resolved the Bardo standoff.²⁵ On January 26, 2014 outgoing prime minister and Ennahda member Ali Laarayedh signed Tunisia's new constitution into law. Two days later he handed power to a technocratic caretaker government headed by a new prime minister, Mehdi Jomaa. The transition, though threatened, continued.

The Lustration Issue: Testing Ennahda's Long-termism

A critical component of Bardo's peaceful resolution was Ennahda leadership's ultimate willingness not just to step down from power, but to oppose the passage of controversial lustration legislation. Throughout the constitutional drafting process in 2012 and 2013, Ennahda had – largely as a result of important pressure placed on it by vocal civil society groups – compromised on a number of ideological issues. The party changed language regarding women's status, retracted an article that would have criminalized blasphemy, and abandoned efforts to include sharia as a source of legislation. None of these issues created as much internal division within Ennahda as the debate over abandoning an electoral lustration law, which was extremely popular within the party.

CPR, the most vociferously pro-revolutionary party in the NCA, first proposed lustration legislation in the form of a law to “immunize” the revolution (*qanun tahseen al-thawra*) in February 2012. Ennahda cast an internal vote of support for the law at its 9th party congress in

²⁵ UGTT led the mediation quartet, which also included the Tunisian Bar Association, the Tunisian League of Human Rights, and the national employer's union, UTICA.

July 2012. Shura Council members I interviewed on the issue referenced other countries that adopted lustration, describing it as a natural and necessary step to protect the revolution. They claimed such a law would protect Tunisia's nascent democracy from old regime actors they said would likely abuse potential electoral gains to stymie reform and reverse Tunisia's transition. On June 28, 2013 Ennahda joined its coalition partners, along with many members of smaller and independent parties, in a vote to signal strong support for lustration legislation.

The coup in Egypt, paired with the assassination of Mohamed Brahmi, severely constricted Ennahda's margin of strategic maneuver, rendering pursuit of lustration legislation politically impossible. Realizing this, Rached Ghannouchi appeared on Nessma TV, a channel especially popular with secularists, on August 25, 2013. He reassured viewers that the immunization law would not be passed. Such a reassurance would, he hoped, quell fears of electoral marginalization amongst Nidaa Tunis and its supporters, possibly luring them to the bargaining table.²⁶ The following week, Ghannouchi met with Beji Caid Essebsi in Paris, raising speculation that some sort of negotiated transition out of the Bardo impasse could be possible.

Ghannouchi's willingness to sacrifice lustration on the altar of a negotiated political settlement created immense tension within Ennahda, whose members claim that the Shura Council, a representative institution, steers the party on major issues. Here, Ghannouchi was superseding the Council, contradicting Ennahda's long-held support for lustration. Many Council members saw these moves as subverting strongly valued institutional procedure and sacrificing strategically important revolutionary principles.

To counterbalance Ghannouchi's concessions, Shura Council members, in conjunction with secular allies in CPR and Ettakatol, pushed hard again for the implementation of an electoral exclusion law. In mid-December 2013, the NCA, with the support of most Ennahda MPs, attempted to attach a lustration provision to comprehensive transitional justice legislation. Realizing the continued popularity and immense political risks of lustration, Ghannouchi went to the NCA to personally lobby Ennahda MPs not to pursue such legislation.

The transitional justice law ultimately passed without a lustration provision. The issue came up again one last time, though, on April 30, 2014. Despite months of Ghannouchi lobbying against lustration, Article 167 – which would have barred anyone who held of a position of responsibility in the RCD from running in Tunisia's parliamentary elections – very nearly passed. Torn between political imperatives and revolutionary principles, many Ennahda MPs known for their strong attendance record either abstained or failed to attend the Constituent Assembly on the voting day. 39 Ennahda MPs voted for the article, directly contravening Ghannouchi's leadership. Only five voted against it. In the end, Article 167 failed to pass by just a single vote after an Ennahda MP switched his vote of support to an abstention.

In his attempt to convince Ennahda MPs that lustration was an imprudent option, Ghannouchi utilized both political and religious arguments. Politically, Ghannouchi stressed that Tunisia was in a fragile period of *al-siyasa al-intiqaliya* (transitional politics). In such a period, he said, apparent gains could easily be reversed, and inclusion and power-sharing represented the best

²⁶ Author interview with Rached Ghannouchi, November 3, 2015.

path to success – both as a party self-interested in survival, and for the viability of Tunisia's transition as a whole. Religiously, Ghannouchi sometimes attempted to use a parable involving the Prophet Muhammad to illustrate the wisdom of inclusion:

When the Prophet Muhammad stood victorious in Mecca, he told the infidels who did not believe in him, *Athabu, fa-entum al-tulaqa'* (Go, you are set free). He did not practice *iqsa* (exclusion) against them and did not prosecute them but instead included them in his army and they became leaders. And if it wasn't for that the Arabian peninsula... would have fought civil war instead of spreading Islam all over the world.²⁷

Many grassroots Nahdawis, however, hesitated to repeat such rationales. For many, the real politik facing Ennahda in the wake of the Morsi coup was clear: offer political space to the RCD or risk an Islamist-excluding “second revolution” in Tunisia. “It makes me sick, but it is common sense,” said Samia, a 46 year-old Ennahda supporter from Bizerte. “Before the coup in Egypt I would have said no—it is wrong to let these people back in, but now it is the only choice we have.”²⁸ The wife of one Ennahda member in the Mellasine neighborhood of Tunis jokingly said that she respected Ghannouchi's attempt to find a religious explanation for abandoning lustration.

He was for it, and now he is against it, and he's doing this [she flipped through a book laughingly] to find a reason why it is right... It is not right, and we [my husband and I] know it, but it is smart... So we will be smart.²⁹

Transition Politics

Many members of Ennahda strongly questioned the wisdom and the morality of abandoning lustration, which they considered an important offensive protection as well as a statement of revolutionary principle. Some gleaned an exclusionary, rather than inclusive, lesson from the Egyptian coup, stressing that the Brotherhood's willingness to cooperate with *fulul* (old regime) actors, particularly the military, sowed the seeds of its downfall.

The active lobbying of Ghannouchi and other long-termist leaders – and fear of what could come if Nidaa Tunis pursued a soft coup in Tunisia – ultimately persuaded a critical mass of Ennahda's leadership, however, to prize strategic pragmatism over rigid principle and allow lustration to fail. Regional developments, combined with local opposition, had constricted Ennahda's margin of political maneuver, particularly on matters related to the pursuance of revolutionary justice, such as transitional justice and lustration. Given Ennahda's background of persecution under RCD rule, members often find that compromising on these issues is especially difficult.

Nevertheless, Ennahda leaders' ability to act if not rightly, then at least smartly, regarding lustration created an incentive structure more favorable to democratic transition. Allowing Essebsi and other former regime officials to run in elections heightened the appeal of

²⁷ See Mounia al-Arfaoui, “Sanusejjil hudhurna bi-tariqa ghir mu'ateda,” *Correspondents.org*, December 5, 2014.

²⁸ Author interview, Bizerte, June 4, 2014.

²⁹ Author interview, Tunis, November 10, 2014.

democratically loyal game-playing for Nidaa Tunis and other leaders of the anti-Troika opposition, many of whom passionately supported Essebsi's candidacy for presidency in autumn, 2014. This facilitated negotiated resolution of the Bardo crisis and Ennahda's peaceful transition to a new, Nidaa Tunis-led coalition government in early 2015.

Ennahda's compromise on lustration also reflects the extent to which it is recasting Islamism in process-dependent and defensive terms. Time and again, Ennahda's attempts to take offensive positions on matters of both religious and revolutionary principle were rebuffed by contextual constraints and local pushback. During its three years at the helm of government (2011-2014) Ennahda underwent a process of deep political learning. Informed by the experience of Algeria in the early 1990s, its own history with the Ben Ali regime, and now the Egyptian coup, Ennahda is honing an approach predicated on canny compromise and defensive minimalism. Rather than blindly unpacking an expansionist box of ideological and political aims, Ennahda plays defensive "transition politics," cautiously appraising its surroundings before moving forward.

This approach, while shrewd, lacks the dynamism of principle-driven movements, be they revolutionary or religious in nature. Ennahda faces the challenge of creatively packaging its brand of cautious conservatism to individuals outside the party's traditional base: members from the 70s and 80s and their immediate families. Constrained by both regional and local developments, Ennahda now finds that political risks outweigh possible rewards of speaking up in favor of either ideological Islamist or revolutionary justice issues – be they related to the economy, security reform and anti-terror legislation, or transitional justice legislation. In the absence of a strong Nahdawi voice on such issues, and without CPR in the parliament, supporters of revolutionary justice in particular find themselves without meaningful political representation. This could threaten Ennahda's ability to craft an appealing, morally meaningful brand that enables it to expand beyond its historic base. It could also lead to feelings of increased marginalization from a non-representative political system if Tunisia's new parliament fails to deliver much sought-after reforms on the economy and other issues.