


Spring 2015

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Sawyer French  
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## Recommended Citation

French, Sawyer, "Tunisia's Young Islamists: Religious or Revolutionary Zealots?" (2015). *Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection*. 2064.

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# Tunisia's Young Islamists: Religious or Revolutionary Zealots?

Sawyer French — Spring 2015<sup>1</sup>

**ABSTRACT:** *Ennahda's many compromises during Tunisia's transition have prompted assessments that the party has alienated its base, especially by not taking more traditionally Islamist stances on issues like sharī'a. This paper draws on interviews with young Tunisian Islamists and assesses how they have responded to Ennahda's compromises. Although some young Islamists are disappointed that Ennahda did not pursue more hard-line Islamist stances, many actually share the leadership's progressive position on certain religious issues. Interestingly, young Islamists were far more angered by Ennahda's compromises on 'revolutionary' issues than they were by its compromises on 'religious' ones. This paper ultimately argues that Islam's role in Tunisian Islamism (although significant) should not be overstated, and that Ennahda and its constituents' other non-religious priorities, like identity and basic self-preservation (manifested as revolutionary zeal), are often of equal or greater importance.*

## Introduction

Ennahda's two years in power—from the October 2011 National Constituent Assembly (NCA) elections to the resignation of Prime Minister 'Ali Larayedh on 9 January 2014—were defined by the Tunisian Islamist party's willingness to compromise. After winning a plurality in the NCA, Ennahda formed a coalition (popularly called 'the Troika') with two center-left secular parties. Contrary to popular fears, the party did not introduce a campaign to 'Islamize' Tunisian society, and even agreed to leave the word '*sharī'a*' out of the constitution. In a truly unprecedented move, Ennahda agreed to concede power to a technocratic government in 2013 in response to pressure from a secular opposition bellied by political assassinations of leftist leaders. Ennahda's pragmatism helped ease dangerous levels of tension and was crucial to the success of Tunisia's democratic transition, but some have wondered how the party's constituents reacted to these compromises.

Ennahda's compromises—particularly those on religious issues like *sharī'a*, traditionally considered to be of major importance to Islamists—have prompted observers to conclude that the party has alienated its supposedly more conservative base. Such an assessment assumes that religious issues such as implementing *sharī'a* are the primary interests of Ennahda and its constituents, and therefore concludes that constituents must be displeased with Ennahda for being less 'Islamic' than they had hoped. This paper challenges this assumption and conclusion by attempting to clarify *which specific actions* by Ennahda have alienated the party's base, and

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was written for the Independent Study Project of the SIT program in Tunis. All research was conducted in Tunisia in April 2015. I would like to thank Hamadi Redissi for providing feedback on an earlier draft.

*to what extent.* Informed by interviews with young Islamists (from across the country and with varied relationships to the formal party), this paper aims to provide insight into their priorities and into the nature of Islamism in the contemporary Tunisian context.

In this paper, I note that some young Islamists did express disappointment with certain compromises, preferring more traditionally hard-line Islamist stances. However, many others share the leadership's progressive stances on certain issues, or have at least accepted its political outlook: that the success of the democratic transition trumps ideological stringency. Ennahda's democratic internal structure and commitment to communicating its message to its base have meant that the gap in ideology between leadership and constituency is smaller than one might assume. A trend that is emphasized throughout this paper is that the compromises youth resented most were those on 'revolutionary'—rather than 'religious'—issues. For example, Ennahda's ultimate decision not to push for lustration (the exclusion of old regime figures from political participation) angered young Islamists far more than the party's acceptance of a constitution without any reference to *sharī'a*—typically considered a primary issue for Islamists. Even the more abstract debate over Tunisian identity seems to be more important to Tunisian Islamists than explicitly religious issues.

As a ruling party, Ennahda's primary concern could not be Islamic issues. They had to engage in more 'real' issues, like maintaining Tunisia's fragile democratic transition. Ennahda's policies and their constituents' reactions should not all be attributed to the fact that they are Islamists; rather, equal attention should be paid to the more 'real' (i.e. non-religious) issues that matter to the party and its constituents. Islam's role in Tunisian Islamism (although significant) should not be overstated, and other non-religious issues are often of greater importance to Ennahda and its constituents. They are certainly Islamists, but that does not mean that they only (or even primarily) mobilize around issues pertaining to Islam.

## **Methodology**

The goal of the research presented in this paper was to understand the ideals and priorities of young Islamists in Tunisia, particularly in comparison to Ennahda's policies while in power. Shadi Hamid (2014) notes that "to truly understand Islamist movements, you have to do something very simple: talk to them, get to know them, and try, in the process, to understand

their fears and aspirations,”<sup>2</sup> so that is exactly what I set out to do. The conclusions and analysis presented in this paper have been informed by 17 interviews with young Islamist (from across Tunisia, and with varying levels of connection to Ennahda). I compare my findings with Ennahda's official positions and with other academic studies and profiles of the party.

It should be noted that my sample of my interviewees did not include anyone over the age of 25, and may not be representative of Ennahda's entire constituency. The conclusions drawn in this paper are based on that limited sample. I chose to study Islamist *youth*, both because of the time constraints of doing research in only one month, and because they are a relatively underrepresented group in academic literature on Islamism in Tunisia. While youth have a much greater role in grassroots activism, older Islamists' views are generally more represented in Ennahda's official positions and policies, as they dominate the party's *shūra* council (the elected body that determines all of Ennahda's official positions). This snapshot of young people's opinions does not paint a picture of the entire party's views, but it aims to cover a group that is less visible, and to illuminate the differences of opinion that exist within Ennahda.

I did not seek out or interview Salafi youth.<sup>3</sup> Salafis espouse a religious perspective and conception of Islamic governance that is far more conservative than mainstream Tunisian Islamists and Islamist groups, like Ennahda. The line between a Salafi and a conservative non-Salafi Islamist is not always clear, but the prevalence of these groups should not be overstated. They are vocal and sometimes violent, and therefore garner significant media attention, but they are not a very large demographic—varying estimates place the total number of Salafis in Tunisia anywhere from 7,000 to 50,000.

In the following section of this paper (“**Defining ‘Islamism’ as Islamists Change**”), I discuss the challenges of defining ‘Islamism’ and academic trends in the conception of non-conventional expressions of Islamism. In the next section (“**The Rise, Fall, and Return of Ennahda**”), I outline Ennahda's origins and the role the party has played in Tunisia's political transition, specifically highlighting its pragmatism and where it has strayed from traditional Islamist policies. The next section (“**An Alienated Base?**”) assesses the accuracy and ubiquity of claims that this pragmatism and moderation by Ennahda has alienated its base, drawing on

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<sup>2</sup> Shadi Hamid, *Temptations of Power: Islamists and Illiberal Democracy in a New Middle East*, (Oxford University Press, 2014), 8.

<sup>3</sup> For information on Salafi youth in Tunisia, see: Monica Marks, “Youth Politics and Tunisian Salafism: Understanding the Jihadi Current,” *Mediterranean Politics* 18.1 (2013).

conversations with young Islamists about their opinions on these issues. I argue that most young Islamists actually prioritized 'revolution' over 'religion.' In the next section ("**Negotiating a Tunisian Identity**"), I continue to question the assumed centrality of religion in Tunisian Islamism by arguing that, along with 'revolutionary' issues, the narration of a specific Tunisian identity is more crucial to the appeal of Tunisian Islamism than any explicitly religious issues are. I conclude this paper by addressing why observers are so quick to portray Ennahda and its constituents as hyper-religious zealots rather than rational actors, and the negative consequences of this misrepresentation in academic analysis.

### **Defining 'Islamism' as Islamists Change**

The term 'Islamist' is fairly difficult to define, and in fact various different definitions can be found in the academic literature on Islamist movements. This difficulty stems from the fact that Islamist groups and their environments are not static. Their character and goals have continually changed as their circumstances have, so a definition that hinges on specific goals becomes problematic. Given their dynamic nature, most attempts to *define* 'Islamism' tend to just *describe* its goals, methods, or principles in the movement's contemporary form. As these groups change, however, the mistaking of once accurate but now outdated descriptions to be still-relevant definitions poses serious threat to the analysis of modern Islamist groups.

A traditional definition generally focuses on their (once ubiquitous) goal: to end 'the rule of man' by creating an Islamic state, in which 'the rule of God' (□*akimiyya*) means *sharī'a*-based governance. This echoes Qutbist and some early Muslim Brotherhood thought. However, since the Brotherhood's early years, these goals have evolved from seeking a complete overthrow of the 'un-Islamic' system into a participatory approach aimed at gradually making the existing state 'Islamic.' Despite this change to a more moderate approach, the definition provided above still fits, as these groups are still pursuing an Islamic state. But issues arise when Islamists not only shift their methods, but their goals as well.

As Peter Mandaville (2014) writes, "conventional Islamism—as represented by the Muslim Brotherhood—has progressively lost market share in recent years to a diverse range of alternative Islamic socio-political projects."<sup>4</sup> In that case, can those "alternative Islamic socio-

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<sup>4</sup> Peter Mandaville, "Is the Post-Islamism Thesis Still Valid?" in [Rethinking Islamist Politics](#) (Project on Middle East Political Science, 11 February 2014), 33.

political projects” still be considered ‘Islamist’? One answer to this question, posited by Oliver Roy in his (1994) *The Failure of Political Islam* and later developed in depth by Asef Bayat, is the concept of ‘post-Islamism,’ which posits parties such as the AKP in Turkey and Ennahda in Tunisia as ‘post-Islamists,’ as they have given up the eventual goal of an Islamic state.<sup>5</sup> Vali Nasr calls these groups ‘Muslim Democrats.’<sup>6</sup>

But many scholars have pushed back against the notion that these so-called ‘post-Islamist’ groups have somehow left the fold of Islamism. Salwa Ismail (2001) argues that the movement Roy originally saw as failing was not ‘Islamism’ per se, but specifically ‘pan-Islamism,’ which had significantly declined in influence since the initial popularity of Iranian revolutionary Islamism after 1979. Islamism, rather than limited to a single expression, she argues, comes “in all shapes and sizes.”<sup>7</sup> Fawaz Gerges similarly argues that groups no longer advocating for an Islamic state can still be considered ‘Islamist,’ and that many are simply shifting their focus towards what he calls ‘civil Islam.’<sup>8</sup> An illuminating metaphor is provided by Khalil al-Anani (2015), who refusing to consider the diversity within Islamism to be analytically problematic, and describes the movement as “a fashion market where Islamists can promote and sell their ideologies and ideas,” opening the door to a diversity of alternative Islamic projects.<sup>9</sup> Advocacy for an Islamic state—many scholars have argued in response to Roy and Bayat—is not the singular essence of what it means to be ‘Islamist.’<sup>10</sup>

The problem with the notion of ‘post-Islamism’ is that it takes a narrow description of what it *meant* to be an Islamist at one historical moment and posited it as the pan-historical definition of what it *means* to be an Islamist, and then disqualifies all modern Islamist incarnations as no longer fitting their definition. An alternative, analytically flexible (though one could argue still merely descriptive) definition is provided by Jillian Schwedler (2011), who calls Islamists “highly diverse political actors who, in varying ways, find the blueprint for social,

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<sup>5</sup> Oliver Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam* (Cambridge; Harvard University Press, 1994); and Asef Bayat, “Islam and Democracy: What is the Real Question?” Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World (2007).

<sup>6</sup> Vali Nasr, “The Rise of ‘Muslim Democracy’,” *Journal of Democracy* 16.2 (2005), 13.

<sup>7</sup> Ismail uses the term ‘the Islamist International’ rather than ‘pan-Islamist,’ which I find to be less clumsy and carry the same meaning. Salwa Ismail, “The Paradox of Islamist Politics,” *Middle East Report* 221 (2001).

<sup>8</sup> Fawaz Gerges, “The Islamist Moment: From Islamic State to Civil Islam,” *Political Science Quarterly* 128.3 (2013).

<sup>9</sup> Khalil al-Anani, “[The ISIS-ification of Islamist politics](#),” *The Washington Post*, 30 January 2015.

<sup>10</sup> For another critique of ‘post-Islamism,’ see: Francois Burgat, “The hidden assumptions of ‘Post-Islamism’,” in *Face to Face with Political Islam* (London and New York: I.B.Tauris, 2003), 180-183.

moral, political, and economic reform in the teachings of the Islamic faith.”<sup>11</sup> This definition allows us to approach groups like Ennahda in Tunisia—and appreciate all of their ideas and positions that stray from traditional ‘Islamic state’-oriented Islamism—without dismissing them from the Islamist arena.

However, even this vaguer, ‘inspired by Islam’ definition (while accurate) should not be used to reduce all the actions of Islamist groups and individuals to purely religious motivations. Islamists, like all ideologues, cannot function in modern political and social life solely within their ideological paradigm, and they have many more ‘real’ (i.e. non-religious) priorities outside of it. As will be explored throughout this paper, Ennahda’s handling of the transition, as well as popular reaction to it among Tunisian Islamists, shows that most of their priorities were non-religious issues. When addressing lustration, coalition-building, or the choice between a parliamentary or presidential system of government, Ennahda was clearly not motivated simply by ‘Islam.’

In this paper, I differentiate between issues of ‘political Islam’ and other political issues that may only be tangentially related to religion. ‘Political Islam’—which rationalizes politics on solely theological grounds—constitutes the attempt to infuse a political system with Islamic principles and to base legislation in that system on Islamic grounds. On the other hand, an issue like identity politics, while often evoking religious sentiment or a religious identity, does not derive its politics from theology, and is therefore not included in this limited definition of ‘political Islam.’ I argue in this paper that political Islam is not the focal point of Tunisian Islamists nor is it their *raison d’être*. They have not renounced political Islam, but other political ideas—like identity and revolution—are simply more important to them.

### **The Rise, Fall, and Return of Ennahda**

This section outlines the history of Ennahda in Tunisia and then concentrates on the party’s role in the political transition after the fall of Ben ‘Ali in January 2011. Special attention is paid to Ennahda’s compromises and on specific controversial issues, and the next section (“**An Alienated Base?**”) will then address the reactions of Islamist youth to the political developments outlined here.

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<sup>11</sup> Jillian Schwedler, “Can Islamists Become Moderates? Rethinking the Inclusion-Moderation Hypothesis,” *World Politics* 63.2 (2011), 349.

Ennahda's roots can be found in the Islamic resurgence that swept across the region in the 1970s. Tunisian Islamists led by Rachid Ghannouchi organized under the name 'the Islamic Group' (*al-Jamā'a al-Islāmiyya*), which they changed in 1981 to 'the Islamic Tendency Movement' (MTI; *ḥarakat al-Ittijah al-Islāmī*). The movement openly opposed the regime of President Habib Bourguiba, and was met with intense persecution. Antagonism between the movement and the regime peaked in 1987, when Bourguiba sentenced Ghannouchi to death. After Ben 'Ali's rise to power later that year, Ghannouchi was pardoned, and the movement enjoyed a period of improved relations with the new regime, during which the movement changed its name to 'Ennahda' (Arabic for 'renaissance'). But their relationship deteriorated again after the general elections of 1989, which Ennahda protested, claiming they were rigged in the regime's favor.<sup>12</sup> Ben 'Ali responded by cracking down on the Islamists harder than it ever had, using fabricated evidence of an impending coup supposedly planned by Islamists and colluding military officers.<sup>13</sup> By late 1991, all Ennahda leaders were either in prison or in exile. This repression lasted, and until the political opening after the fall of Ben 'Ali in January 2011, the movement would have to operate secretly within Tunisia.

Ever since its days as the MTI, Ennahda has been an especially hard group to label and place within al-Anani's "fashion market" of Islamist ideas. The party is considered to be 'post-Islamist' among those who subscribe to the idea.<sup>14</sup> Regardless of labels, Ennahda has always been fairly progressive for an Islamist party, endorsing political pluralism and downplaying the issue of *sharī'a* ever since the 1980s, "several years ahead of Islamist movements elsewhere in the region," as Rory McCarthy argues.<sup>15</sup> The party has never abandoned the implementation of *sharī'a* as a goal, but it professes a non-literalist interpretation that emphasizes justice, progress, and human rights (though not on necessarily Western terms). In 1989, the party even declared its acceptance of "the need to safeguard the previously acquired rights for women that appeared in

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<sup>12</sup> For a more detailed history of Ennahda's relationship with the Tunisian state, see: Alaya Allani, "The Islamists in Tunisia between confrontation and participation: 1980-2008," *The Journal of North African Studies* 14.2 (2009), 260-265.

<sup>13</sup> Brian Klaas, "The Long Shadow of Ben Ali," *Foreign Policy*, 17 December 2013.

<sup>14</sup> See: Rory McCarthy, "Protecting the Sacred: Tunisia's Islamist Movement and the Challenge of Free Speech," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* (2015); Ghaffar Hussain, "[Post-Islamists in the Arab world \(or, Islamists mugged by reality\)](#)," *The Guardian*, 12 November 2011.

<sup>15</sup> McCarthy, "Protecting the Sacred," 3.



Personal Status Code,” a Bourguiba-era law that outlawed polygamy and guaranteed women’s place in the public sphere.<sup>16</sup>

Much of this was politically motivated rhetoric, and not all members agreed, but over the 20 years that Ennahda’s leaders were in prison or in exile, there could be no party-wide debate on Ennahda’s ideology and overall aims. Ghannouchi, living in London, organized conferences for exiled members and published books in which he elaborated a democratic, liberty-centric Islamic political philosophy.<sup>17</sup> In 2003, Ennahda members in exile (*Ennahda fil-khārij*) even joined a joint oppositional platform with secular parties CPR, Ettakatol, and PDP. In a similar multi-party opposition group in 2005, Ennahda even cooperated with the communist Worker’s Party (leftists and Islamists in Tunisia were traditionally adversaries). But those still inside Tunisia (*Ennahda fid-dākhil*), whether in the jails of Ben ‘Ali or stifled by the censorship of authoritarianism (some leaders had been released in 2006 and 2007, but they could not meet openly),<sup>18</sup> were not privy to such discussions.

A real internal debate would only begin after the release of political prisoners and the return of those in exile in January 2011. This started the process of what Monica Marks (2014) calls Ennahda’s “process of becoming re-acquainted with itself personally, ideologically and organizationally.”<sup>19</sup> The party would have to decide as a group where its priorities would lie and what its goals would be: would they would pursue the policy of Islamization that their opponents feared or chart a more moderate path? But this internal debate arose in the frenzy of the transition. The party did not have time to get “re-acquainted with itself” before addressing serious national issues; rather, it would have to iron out its internal differences on certain issues as they arose.

In October 2011, less than a year after Ennahda’s leaders were released from jail and had returned from exile, the party won a plurality in the NCA and the right to build a coalition and form a government. Most importantly, as the dominant bloc in the NCA, Ennahda would shoulder most of the responsibility for writing the new constitution, and most of the blame for its

<sup>16</sup> Allani, “Islamists in Tunisia,” 263.

<sup>17</sup> Rachid Ghannouchi, *al-ḥurriyāt al-‘amma fid-Dawla al-Islāmiyya* (‘Public Liberties in the Islamic State’) (Beirut: Arab Union Research Center, 1993). For an in-depth review and analysis of Ghannouchi’s political philosophy, see: Andrew F. March, “Genealogies of Sovereignty in Islamic Political Theology,” *Social Research* 80.1 (2013).

<sup>18</sup> Monica Marks, [Convince, Coerce, or Compromise? Ennahda’s Approach to Tunisia’s Constitution](#), Brookings Doha Center (February 2014), 12.

<sup>19</sup> Monica Marks, [“How Egypt’s Coup Really Affected Tunisia’s Islamists,”](#) *The Washington Post*, 16 March 2015.

shortcomings. When Ennahda first came to power, the party had yet to reach a consensus on—or even begin a debate on—many key issues.<sup>20</sup> Often, only after certain proposals (by individuals or small groups of Ennahda deputies) gained publicity or became controversial did the party discuss them as a whole. Once an issue came to the fore, the party would debate it in their *shūra* council, and then they would come to an agreement on where the party officially stood.

One such issue that has received a lot of attention has been the controversy over the possible referencing of *sharī'a* in Article 1 of the constitution. The party's 2011 platform had not mentioned it, and Ghannouchi had promised that Ennahda would not push for its inclusion, but shortly after the election, a group of more conservative Ennahda deputies circulated a draft referencing it as “a source among sources” of legislation<sup>21</sup> (it is worth noting that this language is less assertive on *sharī'a* than the platforms of most secular parties throughout the rest of the Arab world). After hearing the news, secularists protested in outrage, feeling vindicated in their suspicions that Ennahda was trying to Islamize the country. They saw the proposal as an assault on Tunisia's longstanding secular heritage.

The crisis prompted the party to begin an internal debate over what their real position on the inclusion of *sharī'a* in the constitution would be. In retrospect, many Ennahda leaders say that it was hardly ever a question, and that the vast majority of Ennahda deputies never wanted to include the reference in the first place, but the party's continued public silence on the matter did nothing to ease concerns. In March 2012, after a resounding 85% of the party's *shūra* council voted against its inclusion, the party finally announced that they would leave the word out of the constitution.<sup>22</sup> This can partially be attributed to political pragmatism and crisis aversion, but one should not overlook the progressive view of *sharī'a* espoused by Ghannouchi and most of Ennahda's leadership. They “emphasized abstract principles over specific rules,” writes Marks,<sup>23</sup> making it far more palatable to forgo an explicit reference, as long as there was nothing in the constitution that conflicts with Islam—which, they say, there is not.

Another conflict arose on the issue of blasphemy, which many Ennahda deputies sought to criminalize in the constitution. A proposed wording of Article 3 read, “the state guarantees

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<sup>20</sup> Marks, *Ennahda's Approach*, 29.

<sup>21</sup> Duncan Picard, “[The Current Status of Constitution Making in Tunisia](#),” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 19 April 2012.

<sup>22</sup> Picard, “Constitution Making.”

<sup>23</sup> Marks, *Ennahda's Approach*, 21.

freedom of religious belief and practice and criminalizes all attacks on that which is sacred.”<sup>24</sup> Many saw this as a breach of the right to free speech, as elaborated elsewhere in the constitution, and it was certainly vague enough to be used by a future regime as an excuse to silence political opposition. Yet, Ennahda was not as willing to abandon this criminalization clause as it had been to forgo a reference to *sharī'a*. This issue was emotional for many Ennahda members, and it was also very relevant in Tunisia at the time. The 2011 airing of the controversial film *Persepolis* on television and a 2012 art exhibit in Tunis—both of which included material that many deemed to be insulting to Islam—resulted in violent Salafi rioting. Ennahda (along with its secular coalition partners), condemned not only the riots, but also the film and the exhibit, which they said constituted an “attack on the sacred.”<sup>25</sup> Despite Ennahda's convictions that unrestricted free speech was dangerous, they were eventually convinced, after a long period of external pressure and consultation with experts in constitutional law, that criminalizing legislation does not belong in a constitution. However, the final draft of the constitution still included a vague clause making the state responsible for the “protection of the sacred.”<sup>26</sup> Indeed, they had not been convinced that insulting religion should not be criminalized, but that this was simply not the place nor the time to do so.

Aside from these issues related to religion (*sharī'a* and blasphemy), Ennahda made other major compromises during the constitutional drafting process. Two of the most important were: deciding not to pursue lustration (the exclusion of old-regime officials from political participation), and settling for a mixed presidential-parliamentary system, while they had originally backed a parliamentary one. The issue of lustration proved to be an emotional issue for most Ennahda members. Most members were victims of the old regime in some way, and many were even tortured. Jamila Ksiksi, an Ennahda parliamentarian, recalls living under constant police surveillance: “we were citizens, but we weren't free.”<sup>27</sup> After the revolution, Ennahda members were understandably fearful of these forces ever regaining power.

Soon after the fall of Ben 'Ali, Ennahda and a few other parties pushed for a lustration law that would prevent all former members of the RCD (Ben 'Ali's party) and anyone who held a government position under Ben 'Ali from contesting the October 2011 NCA elections.

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<sup>24</sup> Marks, *Ennahda's Approach*, 24.

<sup>25</sup> McCarthy, “Protecting the Sacred,” 8.

<sup>26</sup> McCarthy, “Protecting the Sacred,” 1.

<sup>27</sup> Jamila Ksiksi, interview with author in Tunis, 27 April 2015.

Transitional president Beji Caïd Essebsi (himself a former RCD member) objected that this was exclusive and undemocratic, and the electoral code eventually only excluded RCD members who held positions in Ben 'Ali's government or leadership roles within the RCD.<sup>28</sup> However, this law only applied to the 2011 elections, and after Ennahda came to power, a new debate arose around the prospect of more exclusive legislation. Ennahda and its partners in the Troika (Ettakatol and CPR, which also had a history of opposition to Ben 'Ali) proposed the Law for the Immunization of the Revolution, which sought exclusion of old regime officials in future elections. Opponents accused the Troika of using lustration to consolidate power, fearing that they would use the law to target political opponents. But the law passed the NCA in June 2013, over a year after it was originally proposed.

However, in response to the political crisis following the assassination of Mohamed Brahmi that July, Ennahda backtracked. In an attempt to ease political tensions, Ghannouchi announced that the law, although passed, would not be implemented.<sup>29</sup> This resolved the issue in the short term, but Ennahda members were left divided over the prospect of lustration. For many members, memories of torture and repression under Ben 'Ali were still fresh in their minds, and they still vehemently opposed allowing them to participate in the new government. When it came time for the NCA to vote on lustration again (it was included in Article 167 of the 2014 electoral code), Ennahda's delegates were split on the issue. While the party no longer officially advocated lustration, some members could not bring themselves to vote against of their former oppressors' exclusion. This was the first and only time during the transition when a significant number of the party's delegates strayed from the party line. But even with the support of some Ennahda members, Article 167 failed in the NCA. Ghannouchi's leadership had compelled enough of Ennahda's delegation to compromise on their revolutionary ideals. As a result, former RCD leaders and ministers under Ben 'Ali were not barred from participating in the fall 2014 parliamentary and presidential elections.<sup>30</sup>

A similar issue—also involving Ennahda members' fears of authoritarianism reemerging—was the debate over the model of government of the new political order. Ennahda

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<sup>28</sup> Article 16, Tunisian Transitional Electoral Code, passed 10 May 2011. For a French translation, see: [http://www.legislation-securite.tn/sites/default/files/Dcret-loi\\_n°\\_2011-35\\_du\\_10\\_Mai\\_2011\\_\(Fr\)\\_0.pdf](http://www.legislation-securite.tn/sites/default/files/Dcret-loi_n°_2011-35_du_10_Mai_2011_(Fr)_0.pdf).

<sup>29</sup> Karina Piser and Rim Dhaouadi, "Excluding the Old Regime: Political Participation in Tunisia," *Muftah*, 5 May 2014. It is rumored that this concession was brokered in a secret meeting between Ghannouchi and Essebsi in a Paris hotel room.

<sup>30</sup> Piser and Dhaouadi, "Excluding the Old Regime."

pushed for a parliamentary model, in which there was no strong executive. They stressed that this would be the most effective way to prevent any one party or leader from consolidating too much power. Again, this was a position shaped by their experience under the old regime. This model would also serve Ennahda's political interests, as they were (at the time), by far the largest party in Tunisia and the most able to reap the benefits of a strong parliament. Smaller parties, on the other hand, were not able to compete as many local elections as Ennahda in parliamentary races, and preferred a model with a president who could check the power of the parliament (they also had big-name candidates who they hoped could vie for the presidency). Eventually, Ennahda compromised with the opposition, accepting a much stronger role for the president than they had originally hoped. Marks writes that this compromise (like their compromise on lustration) was "hastened" by the two political assassinations of 2013, which rallied public opinion against Ennahda and placed them "in a weaker bargaining position."<sup>31</sup>

That same wave of anti-Ennahda sentiment eventually led to their negotiated fall from power. Facing a massive wave of protests—reminiscent of those that had recently led to a military coup deposing an Islamist-led government in Egypt—a unified opposing civil society, and the growing strength of Beji Caïd Essebsi's Nidaa Tounes party ('the Call of Tunisia,' which he had launched in the summer of 2012 on a strictly anti-Islamist platform), Ennahda agreed to negotiate a peaceful transfer of power to a technocratic government. This unprecedented move secured the safety of Tunisia's fragile transition and was the last of many concessions made by Ennahda during its period in power. On January 26, 2014 the final draft of the constitution was ratified by the NCA, and on January 29, Ennahda officially stepped down.<sup>32</sup>

The new, technocratic 'caretaker' government oversaw the parliamentary and presidential elections in late 2014, in which Nidaa Tounes unseated Ennahda as the parliamentary majority and Essebsi won the presidency. Ennahda won only 30% of the vote after winning 37% only three years prior.<sup>33</sup> By January 2015, Nidaa Tounes was struggling to form a majority bloc in parliament, so Essebsi eventually asked Ennahda to join the government. Ennahda agreed, to the dismay of both party's constituents (who had each been told for months that either Nidaa Tounes represented the old regime or that Ennahda was scheming to Islamize the country). Ghannouchi

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<sup>31</sup> Marks, *Ennahda's Approach*, 27.

<sup>32</sup> Carlotta Gall, "[Islamist Party in Tunisia Hands Power to Caretaker Government](#)," *The New York Times*, 29 January 2014.

<sup>33</sup> "[Tunisia's election: The secularist comeback](#)," *The Economist*, 28 October 2014.

tried to explain that it was better to have “a modest seat on a safe and secure ship” than “a full luxurious suite on a ship... destined to sink.”<sup>34</sup> This was a reasonable analogy, as Ennahda was generally considered to be large enough that, had it remained in the opposition, Nidaa Tounes' government would have struggled to govern. So in three years, Ennahda lost significant electoral ground and went from leading its own coalition to awkwardly cooperating with a party whose entire *raison d'être* was essentially its opposition to Ennahda.

### **An Alienated Base?**

There is no shortage of possible explanations as to why Ennahda fared so much worse in the 2014 elections compared to 2011: a poor economic record, a failure to eliminate corruption, a deteriorating security situation, and a highly critical media, all combined with unreasonably high expectations after the popular revolution. Another theory is that, along with the aforementioned grievances, the party had alienated its core constituents by repeatedly compromising their Islamist values—values that, supposedly, had been key to their initial electoral success.<sup>35</sup> Marks recalls an interview with a disillusioned Ennahda supporter who lamented, “I just don't see what makes them Islamic anymore.”<sup>36</sup> A young man I spoke to complained that Ennahda did not even apply “2 percent of Islam.”<sup>37</sup> Hamid suggests that this feeling is widespread, writing, “Many Tunisians voted for Ennahda because it was an Islamist party, not in spite of it. Wanting sharia to play a larger role in politics, they grew disappointed each time Ennahda backed down.”<sup>38</sup> Even Ghannouchi suggested that their support may have “gone down a bit because of the compromises we had to give.”<sup>39</sup>

When I began conducting research for this paper, I set out to gauge the accuracy and ubiquity of the conclusion that Ennahda had alienated its base. I never doubted that some were disappointed, but I wanted to know *by which compromises* and *how disappointed*. Those concluding that Ennahda has alienated its constituents often assume that so-called ‘Islamic’

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<sup>34</sup> Rachid Ghannouchi, “[Why did Ennahda accept an unequal partnership?](#)” *Middle East Monitor*, 6 March 2015.

<sup>35</sup> See: Shadi Hamid, “[Tunisia field report: The Islamist balancing act](#),” Brookings, 12 February 2015; and, Hardin Lang, Mokhtar Awad, Peter Juul, and Brian Katulis, *Tunisia's Struggle for Political Pluralism After Ennahda*, Center for American Progress (April 2014), 12.

<sup>36</sup> Marks, *Ennahda's Approach*, 17.

<sup>37</sup> Young Islamist, interview with author in Sidi Bouzid, 18 April 2015.

<sup>38</sup> Hamid, *Temptations of Power*, 200.

<sup>39</sup> Lally Weymouth, “[An interview with Tunisia's Rachid Ghannouchi, three years after the revolution](#),” *The Washington Post*, 12 December 2013.

issues are the priority for most Tunisian Islamists, more so than other more 'real' issues. They conclude that Ennahda's constituents must be disappointed because the party is not 'Islamic' enough. I find that, while some do feel this way, they are far more concerned with Ennahda's revolutionary credentials than with its religious ones. While some young Islamists have been alienated by Ennahda's compromises, most show an understanding that ideological stringency needed to be sacrificed in order to protect the democratic transition, especially given the tense political atmosphere. While Ennahda did anger many of its supporters with some of the policies it pursued, observers too often only address their anger on religious issues (like *sharī'a* and blasphemy) while ignoring their outrage over non-religious ones (like lustration and cooperation with Nidaa Tounes).

In the case of Salafis, observers are correct in asserting that potential supporters were alienated by Ennahda not being 'Islamic' enough. Immediately after the revolution, many Salafis began supporting Ennahda, hoping it would take hard-line stances on Islamist issues. Before the 2011 elections, one Salafi party told its constituents to vote for Ennahda in races in which the party was not running a candidate. Salafis quickly realized, however, that Ennahda did not share most of their conservative views, and quickly grew dissatisfied with the party. The Salafi party that supported Ennahda in 2011 did not do the same for the 2014 elections. Although Salafis are very vocal (and sometimes violent) and therefore often in the spotlight, they are not a significant electoral demographic (the population of Salafis in Tunisia is only estimated at about 7,000-10,000 people). For its first year in office, Ennahda tried to include and appeal to Salafis, but eventually came to the conclusion that the benefit of pandering to Salafis was too little and that the price it paid in the media was too high. This paper does not address popular opinion among Salafis, and the reader should note that this small, though not insignificant, fraction of Islamists in Tunisia generally holds more conservative views than the mainstream Islamists I interviewed.

Before addressing young Islamists' responses to Ennahda's policies, it is important to understand what young Tunisian Islamists really believe and want when it comes to religious issues. A classic issue in Islamist movements is *sharī'a*, but what exactly does it mean to them? Everyone I talked to expressed a positive view of it, but that suggests nothing about their understanding of it or their opinions on its proper role in governance. The nuances of these points are often overlooked, and Islamist groups are lumped together simply because they all advocate *sharī'a*, while often holding very different understandings of what it means.

Most young Tunisians I spoke with defined *sharī'a* very broadly as 'a way of life,' and said its goals were justice, equality, and freedom. This progressive interpretation allows them to speak about a variety of societal issues through reference to *sharī'a*. They described Tunisia's need for infrastructure, development, human rights, pluralism, good governance, and social justice, and would then explain that *sharī'a* advocates the same principles. Interestingly, when speaking with young Islamists in Sidi Bouzid (an impoverished interior governorate), they would consistently emphasize that *sharī'a* explicitly called for economic redistribution. This was rarely expressed by Islamists on the coastal regions, which are typically more developed. In this context, we see what is assumed to be a purely religious concept being used as a response to structural regional inequality—a rhetorical legitimization of real, material needs and desires.

When discussing *sharī'a*'s role in governance, I received varied responses. Again, most expressed a loose interpretation that emphasizes *maqā'id* (objectives) over specific prescriptions. They would explain that popular images of *sharī'a* in the media are wrong, and that unjust *sharī'a*-based systems around the world were the result of flawed application, rather than a flaw in *sharī'a* itself. Multiple informants explained that, while supporting *sharī'a*, they opposed cutting off the hands of thieves, and that, throughout the rule of the Rightly Guided Caliphs (the first four), that punishment was given only four times. They would explain that *sharī'a* means social justice, and that if the poor were forced to steal, then it was the ruler who was truly at fault for not developing a just society.<sup>40</sup>

On the issue of alcohol, which is forbidden in the Qur'an, most also take a progressive, utilitarian position. They explain that *sharī'a* is concerned with people's wellbeing, and that is why alcohol is forbidden. They note, however, *sharī'a* must also solve issues practically, and that given the widespread use of alcohol in Tunisia, outlawing it would be impractical and drive the market underground (usually referencing the American experience with prohibition). Many also mention that the production of alcohol is a source of vital income for people working in that industry, and that unless there are other economic opportunities, then its prohibition would only make people's lives worse (i.e. contradict *sharī'a*). "Which is more important," one volunteer at

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<sup>40</sup> One informant told a story about Caliph 'Umar, who was presented with a worker who had been caught stealing from his employer. The employer expects 'Umar to cut off his hands, but then 'Umar asks the worker why he had stolen. The worker replied that he was not paid enough to survive. 'Umar said that if this issue arose again, he would cut off the employers hand. Young Islamist activist, interview with author in Tunis, 15 April 2015.



an Islamic education center asked me, “solving problems or following rules?”<sup>41</sup> Their non-literalism allows them to take these rational (though still religiously-based) approaches to modern issues. They are not using utilitarianism to debate *sharī'a*; rather, they are referencing the utilitarian principles of *sharī'a* itself. They explain that *sharī'a*, as a broader concept, is the promotion of justice, and that if a government did that, even if it was not based on the explicit prescriptions of *sharī'a*, it could be considered to be applying it. One Ennahda supporter even told me that *sharī'a* “is everything that doesn't conflict with religion.”

The young Islamists who espouse this type of loose interpretation of *sharī'a*—a majority of those I spoke with—were not angry about Ennahda's decision to not include an explicit reference to *sharī'a* in of the constitution. If given the choice, they would have included it, but they explained that nothing in the constitution conflicts with *sharī'a*, so leaving the word out was not a problem. “We can protect it [*sharī'a*] without saying it,” insisted Amal Souid, Ennahda's youngest parliamentarian.<sup>42</sup> Many like Souid emphasized that, even without a direct reference, the constitution was a success in terms of *sharī'a*, as it protected its larger societal goals, like justice and equality. Multiple young Islamists even told me that what was important was that the constitution preserved the individual's freedom to practice *sharī'a* in his or her own life.

Other, more conservative young Islamists have a more literal understanding of *sharī'a*. They see its prescriptions and punishments—not as paramount to, but—as the best means by which to achieve the *maqā'id* (objectives) of *sharī'a*. Given that God's law is ‘perfect,’ one informant explained, it should be applied “as it is.”<sup>43</sup> However, this group is generally divided between those who believe it should be applied immediately, and others who say that society is not ready, and that through preaching and setting a good example, they could foster a more pious society that would be open to *sharī'a*. Most of the young people I interviewed with a literalist interpretation advocated this gradual approach, which is sometimes called the Islamic ‘social project,’ as they aspire to bring about popular piety through social outreach, rather than politics. Supporters of this ‘social project’ often quote the Qur'an to explain their approach, insisting, “there can be no compulsion in religion” (2:256). They object to enforcing *sharī'a* on an unwilling population, and have faith that *da'wa* (preaching) will gradually cause Tunisians to

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<sup>41</sup> Islamic education center volunteer, interview with author, 19 April 2015.

<sup>42</sup> Amal Souid, interview with author in Sidi Bou Saïd, 24 April 2015.

<sup>43</sup> Young Islamist, interview with author in Sidi Bouzid, 18 April 2015.

live more religiously observant lives, until eventually, the vast majority of society is already living by the *sharī'a* and agrees on its legal implementation.

Only those who believe that *sharī'a* should be implemented immediately—a small, but significant minority of interviewees—expressed much anger or disappointment that Ennahda did not push for a reference to *sharī'a* in the constitution or pursue more hard-line Islamist policies.<sup>44</sup> One disappointed supporter recalled that she “couldn’t understand what Ennahda was thinking,” and that she had genuinely hoped that Ennahda would bring truly Islamic governance.<sup>45</sup> But even out of those who were displeased with Ennahda’s moderation and pragmatism, not many seemed to have given up on the party. They insist (with a few years of retrospect) that Ennahda had done its best given its political constraints.

Overall, a very few of the youth I spoke with were bothered by Ennahda’s decision to leave *sharī'a* out of the constitution. These were usually the same people who expressed disappointment that Ennahda was not ‘Islamic’ enough, usually using its continued toleration of alcohol consumption as an example. Whether someone was angered by or accepting of the party’s stance on *sharī'a* generally resulted from his or her understanding of *sharī'a* itself. A majority of young Islamists either had no interest in applying *sharī'a* literally, or they had no interest in applying *sharī'a* literally *right now*. Understandably, then, what a vocal minority decried as an abandonment of Islamic values was largely a non-issue for a majority of Islamist youth.

Another important issue for Islamists is the relationship between freedom of expression and blasphemy. In light of Ennahda’s agreement to not criminalize “all attacks on that which is sacred” in the constitution, young people’s views on the same issue are enlightening. Everyone I spoke with believed that insulting religion was unacceptable, and nearly all wanted it to be criminalized. They would emphasize that freedom of expression was important, but usually mention that “there are red lines,” which cannot be crossed.<sup>46</sup> Many see it as a matter of tolerance and respect, and argue that an individual’s liberty cannot infringe on the liberty of others. Insults against Islam (and other religions), they argue, qualify as this kind of infringement on the liberty of religious individuals to practice their faith. “Freedom of speech does not give

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<sup>44</sup> Only two of the 17 young Islamists I spoke with expressed the desire to have *sharī'a* implemented immediately and literally.

<sup>45</sup> Young Islamist, interview with author on Facebook chat, 8 April 2015.

<sup>46</sup> Young Islamist, interview with author in Sidi Bouzid, 18 April 2015.

the right to insult others,” one young man argued. “Rights come with respect.”<sup>47</sup> The resulting position is one of forced toleration (rights conditioned on respect for others), which portrays religious people (though not God, most admit) as needing protection from insult. This represented the majority opinion of the Islamists (and even some non-Islamists) I spoke with. Only a few believed that imprisonment was not the correct response, and everyone saw insulting religion as an incitement against Tunisians’ Muslim identity.

One young Ennahda supporter explained that there are always limits to freedom, and that even in America no one has the right to be naked in public. Just like nudity is considered a violation of public morality in American society, he reasoned, attacks on religion conflict with the morals of Tunisian society, and should therefore be illegal.<sup>48</sup> An extension of this argument that many supported was that, given the nature of Tunisian society, one cannot expect Tunisians to not riot or react violently to these ‘provocations.’ “People who insult Islam give ISIS a reason to exist in the first place,” one young man argued.<sup>49</sup> After denouncing the attacks in Paris earlier in January 2015, they would often explain that the cartoonists at Charlie Hebdo had provoked retaliation by publishing revolting images of the prophet Muhammad and Jesus Christ, thereby attacking not only Islam, but Muslims themselves.

When talking about attacks on religion, it is common to hear Islamists evoke a perception that they, as Muslims, are personally under attack. This attitude can at least partially be attributed to a victim mentality developed under the old regime. Many Islamists had been harassed by authorities for public displays of religiosity, and their attempts to limit free speech can be seen as an overreaction in the other direction. As Marks explains, “their shared sense of ‘never again’ ... has sometimes resulted in hyper-defensiveness and a tendency to neglect others’ right to more secular forms of expression.”<sup>50</sup>

Regardless of their passionate opposition to insulting Islam, few young Islamists had opinions on Ennahda’s decision to not criminalize “all attacks on that which is sacred” in the constitution, and most seemed unaware of issue altogether. Those who were informed seemed content with the eventual wording in the constitution, which required the state to ‘protect’ the sacred. In all my conversations with young Islamists, no one ever expressed anger towards

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<sup>47</sup> Young Islamist, interview with author in Tunis, 15 April 2015.

<sup>48</sup> Ennahda supporter, interview with author in Tunis, 23 April 2015.

<sup>49</sup> Young Islamist, interview with author in Tunis, 15 April 2015.

<sup>50</sup> Marks, *Ennahda's Approach*, 16.

Ennahda for changing the wording from ‘criminalize attacks against’ to ‘protects,’ and many hardly saw the difference.

Overall, Ennahda’s eventual positions on issues related to religion (like *sharī‘a* and blasphemy) either resemble the views of progressive Islamists, or they did not terribly upset most conservative ones. Specifically on the issue of including *sharī‘a* in the constitution, the word itself meant far less to the majority of young Islamists than whether the constitution followed the spirit of *sharī‘a*, and most agreed it did. However, a small but significant minority *was* angered by *sharī‘a* being left out of the constitution, and moreso by Ennahda’s overall practice in government, which they saw as insufficiently ‘Islamic.’ Given this information, it is certainly appropriate for observers to conclude that Ennahda has alienated *some* of its base by taking progressive stances on religious issues, but a large majority of young Islamists still support Ennahda and the positions it took on these issues while in power.

Where Ennahda angered a larger portion of its base, however, was its compromises on certain non-religious issues. Interestingly, controversies concerning what would be considered ‘protection of the revolution’—like lustration (political exclusion of old regime officials) and Ennahda’s cooperation with Nidaa Tounes (a party that includes some former RCD members)—occupy far more of most Islamists’ attention. Marks argues, in congress with others who write about Ennahda’s supposedly alienated base, that the party’s constituents are, in fact, more attached to matters of ‘principle’ than its leadership. She qualifies, however, that an Ennahda supporter’s concept of ‘principle’ “does not exclusively mean religiously grounded ideology.” Rather:

Many of the toughest debates inside the party and sharpest criticisms of its leadership have come from Ennahda members upset not about sharia or classic so-called “Islamist” issues, but about the party’s seeming over-eagerness to compromise with figures from the old regime.<sup>51</sup>

My conversations with young Islamists corroborate this claim. While those I spoke with have had a few years to come to terms with these compromises, and often admit that they can now see the rationales behind them, they recall being deeply disturbed that Ennahda had, as multiple informants put it, “sold the revolution.”<sup>52</sup>

<sup>51</sup> Marks, *Ennahda’s Approach*, 17.

<sup>52</sup> Two separate young Islamists used the same phrasing to describe Ennahda’s compromises and cooperation with old regime figures. Interviews with author in Sidi Bouzid, 18 April 2015.

When Ghannouchi announced in August 2013 that Ennahda would not pursue lustration, most young Islamists (along with many older ones) were outraged. One young man told me that he still hates Ghannouchi for making the concession, referring to him multiple times as a ‘bastard.’<sup>53</sup> Ennahda deputy Jamila Ksiksi mentioned that she still receives Facebook messages from angry young Islamists, attacking her and the party for compromising.<sup>54</sup> Even though the party's youth were rarely jailed and tortured under Ben ‘Ali like some of its older members were, many of them had grown up with their families under surveillance or their fathers in prison, and they still harbor deep resentment for the RCD. This passionate unwillingness to work with former RCD officials is not unique to the overzealous youth of the party; as mentioned earlier, many Ennahda deputies voted in favor of lustration in April 2014 in the NCA—against the official position of the party.

When I interviewed young Islamists on this issue, it had been about a year since the vote on Article 167 of the electoral code and the decision not to exclude old regime figures. In the time since their initial outrage over the issue, many of my informants had come to terms with the issue. Fairly consistently, they would explain that, while they were angry at first, they now understand that it was a necessary compromise for the sake of the transition. Building a strong democracy, most young Islamists explained, is more important than old grievances. Their focus on preserving Tunisia's nascent democracy is a result of Islamists' fear of authoritarianism. They remember Tunisia before the revolution, and when they watch the news, they see in Egypt what could still be lost.<sup>55</sup> One young Ennahda supporter explained that Ghannouchi's compromise seemed clever in retrospect, especially “after seeing how it could have ended up,” alluding to the post-coup crackdown on Islamists in Egypt.<sup>56</sup>

One young Islamist described Ghannouchi as being like a grandfather; the youth resent his advice, but inevitably come to see the wisdom in it.<sup>57</sup> Many of these young people changed their minds, in part, because Ennahda spent the effort to convince them. The party shows a deep commitment to communicating with their constituents. When the leadership made what they expected to be unpopular compromises (like forgoing lustration), high ranking officials would

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<sup>53</sup> Young Islamist, interview with author, 18 April 2015.

<sup>54</sup> Jamila Ksiksi, interview with author, 27 April 2015.

<sup>55</sup> On the lessons Tunisian Islamists learned from the failures of their Egyptian counterparts, see: Marks, “Egypt's Coup.”

<sup>56</sup> Young Islamist, interview with author, 23 April 2015.

<sup>57</sup> Young Islamist, interview with author, 19 April 2015.

visit universities and meet with students to explain their larger objectives. One young woman recalled that Prime Minister 'Ali Larayedh had come to her university to discuss students' concerns and had listened patiently to their complaints.<sup>58</sup> Ennahda has over 300 local offices throughout the country, which regularly hold meetings for members to debate party issues. While the young members may not be the ones determining Ennahda's decisions, involving them in policy discussions and taking the time to explain the party's strategy to them has allowed Ennahda to minimize the repercussions of unpopular compromises. As a result, most young Islamists who were initially angry now admit that Ennahda's decision not to pursue lustration was the right choice given the political atmosphere and their larger goals.

A more recent source of sincere disappointment for many young Islamists' (one which they have not had as much time to process) was Ennahda's decision to enter into a government led by Nidaa Tounes. Founded by Essebsi in 2012 on an exclusively anti-Islamist platform, Nidaa Tounes is perceived by many Islamists to be somewhat of a reincarnation of the old regime. Although this is hyperbolic, some of Nidaa Tounes' members do come from the RCD and Ben 'Ali's governments (current Nidaa Tounes prime minister Habib Essid, for example, was an official under Ben 'Ali). It also does not help their case that the party has often resorted to divisive anti-Islamist rhetoric similar to what Ben 'Ali once used to drum up support.<sup>59</sup>

Given that most young Islamists consider Nidaa Tounes' to be anti-revolutionary in nature, many adamantly preferred that Ennahda remain in the opposition. It was bad enough, they would explain, that members of the old regime were allowed back in power, but Ennahda's cooperation with them was truly a compromise of their revolutionary ideals. Ennahda parliamentarians even expressed how difficult it is for them to work with some of the same people that once imprisoned their friends and family, and against whom Tunisians had launched a revolution four years earlier. "I was mad, but then I understood," explained Amal Souid, an Ennahda parliamentarian. "What can we do? The people chose them."<sup>60</sup> This demonstrates a painful acceptance of democratic principles, and although many Ennahda leaders and supporters

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<sup>58</sup> Young Islamist, interview with author in Sidi Bouzid, 19 April 2015.

<sup>59</sup> In a recent interview, Essebsi asserted, "Islamists ... dream of reintroducing the 7th century... [but] have failed and Tunisia shall never be governed by sharia law." This may describe most Tunisian Salafis, but this does not represent Ennahda's policies or positions, and his failure to differentiate is dangerously divisive. See: Alfred de Montesquiou and Oliver Royant, [interview with Beji Caïd Essebsi](#), *Paris Match*, 22 March 2015.

<sup>60</sup> Amal Souid, interview with author in Sidi Bou Saïd, 24 April 2015.

are uncomfortable with Nidaa Tounes, this has not prevented them from working together for what Ghannouchi calls “the good of the country.”<sup>61</sup>

It is important to note that Islamists rarely expressed disappointment that Ennahda had cooperated with non-Islamists in general, but that it was specifically old regime figures that they resented. No one I spoke with expressed contempt for members of Ettakatol or CPR, the two ‘secular revolutionary’ parties with which Ennahda had formed a coalition (the Troika) after the 2011 elections.<sup>62</sup> In fact, most young Islamists supported CPR’s Moncef Marzouki both times he ran for president. Ennahda’s recent decision to join Nidaa Tounes’ government, on the other hand, did make many young Islamists upset. In an interview with *al-Ahram*, Ennahda member and former deputy speaker of the NCA Mehrezia Labidi said:

I would have chosen to vote for Hammami the [leader of the leftist Popular Front, a party with a history of opposition to Ben ‘Ali] if he reached the presidential runoff round against Essebsi, who [referring to Hammami] I am confident we will not disagree with over issue of freedoms.<sup>63</sup>

Islamists’ opposition to Nidaa Tounes can partially be attributed to the extremely anti-Islamist rhetoric employed by Nidaa Tounes in their campaign, but most young Islamists explain their anger by pointing to former RCD members that now hold positions in or support Nidaa Tounes, as well as their perceived opposition to ‘freedom.’ This is what led one angry young man to exclaim that Ghannouchi had “sold the revolution to Essebsi.”<sup>64</sup>

In the writings of many observers and analysts, Ennahda’s base was supposedly alienated because the party was not Islamic enough. But what really angered these young Islamists was their perception that Ennahda was not *revolutionary* enough. These young Islamists value revolution over religion, in part, because political Islam is only a matter of ideology, whereas preserving the pluralism of the post-Ben ‘Ali order is a matter of survival. The revolution of 2010 and 2011 may not have been Islamic in nature or even led by Islamists, but they were the major beneficiaries of the political opening that followed. They were no longer arrested or harassed for public displays of religiosity, and they were free to organize openly for the first time in twenty years. When most secular youth talk about the revolution, they complain that it has

<sup>61</sup> Ghannouchi, “Unequal partnership.”

<sup>62</sup> Here, the term ‘secular revolutionary,’ which differentiates parties like CPR and Ettakatol from Nidaa Tounes, is borrowed from: ACRPS Policy Analysis Unit, “[Tunisian Legislative Elections: A Vote Between the Revolution and the Old Regime](#),” Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, (2014), 5.

<sup>63</sup> Mehrezia Labidi, interviewed by Karem Yehia, “[Leading Ennahda MP: ‘We brought Tunisia into the democratic era’](#),” *Ahram Online*, 5 December 2014.

<sup>64</sup> Young Islamist, interview with author, 18 April 2015.

failed, and that nothing (specifically not the economy) has improved since 2011. On the other hand, nearly all Islamist youth still see the revolution as a success, regardless its faults, because it brought freedom and democracy. In a Pew poll, 57% of Tunisians with a favorable view of Ennahda preferred democracy to other forms of government, with only 45% for those with an unfavorable view of Ennahda.<sup>65</sup> While this satisfaction with democracy may largely stem from the fact that their preferred party was in power, Islamists only need to look five years back to remember how their liberties might be restricted under an alternative form of government. As Marks writes, Islamists saw this revolution not only as the end of Ben 'Ali's corrupt single-party state, but also as a "revolution for religious freedom."<sup>66</sup>

Islamists' emphasis on revolution is clearly still related to religion, but not as a reflection of their Islamism *per se*, but of their desire to not be repressed. Their primary motive is not 'political Islam,' but the preservation of their right to simply practice Islam, conservatively, publicly, and without the interference of the state. As discussed earlier, traditionally Islamist issues such as *sharī'a* do matter to young Tunisian Islamists, but not nearly as much as their self-preservation through preservation of the revolution. So while Islamist youth were especially angry that former officials in the old regime would be allowed to participate in the new order (out of fear that they would see the gradual return of repressive policies), they were willing to accept that outcome when they realized it may be the only way to safeguard the victories of the revolution.

Too often, observers over-emphasize the role of religion in Ennahda's decision-making and in its constituents' reactions. Those who conclude that Ennahda has alienated its base are correct in that many Islamists have been frustrated with the party over the last four years, but what they usually miss is that these constituents are far angrier about non-religious issues. Although most Salafis (comprising a small but vocal minority) now consider Ennahda to be insufficiently Islamic, focusing on this discontented minority obscures the nature and priorities of the Ennahda's core constituents. Because of historical and contemporary factors, young Islamists in Tunisia tend to prioritize democracy, freedom, and the broader concept of 'revolution' over issues that are seen as traditionally Islamist, such as the application of *sharī'a*. *Sharī'a* is still important to them, but other issues are usually more important.

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<sup>65</sup> "[Tunisian confidence in democracy wanes](#)," Pew Global, 15 October 2014.

<sup>66</sup> Marks, *Ennahda's Approach*, 15.



## Negotiating a Tunisian Identity

Another issue of supreme importance to Tunisian Islamists—again, more important than explicitly religious issues—is the question of a Tunisian identity. Discerning young Islamists' sense of identity was not initially a goal of my research, but its importance to Islamists helps illustrate that they do not focus solely (or even primarily) on traditionally Islamist issues.

After the revolution, a national dialogue arose on what it means to be 'Tunisian,' an issue that had never risen to the surface under authoritarianism. Both Bourguiba and Ben 'Ali had promoted a narrative of a united Tunisian society with a monolithic identity: liberal, modern, and secular. Cavatora and Haugbølle (2012) explore how both dictators promoted the idea that Tunisia's problems could be solved by eliminating cultural and religious 'backwardness,' and how they used that rationale to impose their own secular narrative by forcibly removing traditional faith from the public sphere. This policy ultimately "had the effect of reawakening demands for the Arab-Muslim identity to be much more recognized," assert Cavatora and Haugbølle.<sup>67</sup> Tunisia's conservative and religiously observant were stifled under the state's coercive narrative, only to emerge in 2011 after the revolution. Their newly asserted presence in Tunisian society—and the sudden visibility of diversity—prompted a debate on what it really means to be 'Tunisian.'

Those Tunisian who actually are liberal, modern, and secular often recall their surprise at the sudden widespread presence of religious conservatism after the revolution. They had never seen so many veiled young women and bearded men, let alone people wearing Salafi-style 7<sup>th</sup> century Arabian garb. Liberal Tunisians often remark that those conservative lifestyles are not really 'Tunisian.' This perspective is understandable, as their experiences had been a product of the old regime's purposeful elimination of those lifestyles from the public realm. These newly visible religious conservatives are still 'Tunisians;' they just represent the counter-culture many Tunisians they had never been allowed to see.

Under Ben 'Ali, veiled women were forbidden from entering universities, and some women had their headscarves forcibly removed by police. Men who regularly attended morning prayers—or those who simply 'looked' Islamist—would routinely be arrested in the middle of the night by police without cause. Ultimately, the state stifled not just religious conservatism, but

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<sup>67</sup> Francesco Cavatora and Rikke Hostrup Haugbølle, "The End of Authoritarian Rule and the Mythology of Tunisia under Ben Ali," *Mediterranean Politics* 17.2 (2012), 189-190.

all public religiosity. Such a policy not only served the regime's narrative of a 'modern' Tunisia, but it was also another way to intimidate Ennahda members and sympathizers, who were portrayed as a public threat after the 1991 crackdown.

The rise and eventual popularity of Islamism in Tunisia can partially be attributed to this promotion of a popular culture that many perceived as anti-tradition. Tunisians who were proud of their Arab, Islamic heritage were frustrated by what was largely a cultural posturing towards (and emulation of) Europe. An early incarnation of this frustration was the popularity of Nasserist pan-Arabism in the 1950s and 1960s. Ghannouchi himself was a Nasserist (partly out of admiration for Nasser's Arabist identity politics) before 'converting' to Islamism in the late 1960s.<sup>68</sup> Azzam Tamimi, in his (2001) biography of Ghannouchi, describes him in adolescence as "traumatized" by the conflict between his traditional upbringing and "the thoroughly secularist urban society" of contemporary Tunis.<sup>69</sup> Socialism aside, what pan-Arabism had to offer was pride in Arab heritage, something many Tunisians could find little of at home. Following the virtual death of pan-Arabism after the 1967 war, a popular Tunisian desire for an Arab Islamic identity logically translated into Islamism.<sup>70</sup>

So Islamism, the ideological roots of Ennahda, arose from the shell of Arabism, and the popularity of both can be (at least partially) attributed to the regime's narration of an exclusively 'secular' and 'modern' Tunisian identity. This makes a pivot back to an Arab Islamic identity a part of Ennahda's *raison d'être*. Tunisians' Islamism never existed in the same context as that of the Muslim Brothers in Egypt, whose Islamism had constituted a pivot towards Islam, countering an often anti-religious Arabism. In Tunisia, both Arabism and Islamism narrated the same identity and countered Western secularism; Tunisian Islamism held (and still holds) within it Arabism. This is evident in the linguistic posturing of some Islamists and secularists in Tunisia. At the risk of generalization, Tunisian Islamists prefer to use Arabic over French, which they consider to be a colonial remnant.<sup>71</sup> Secularists, on the other hand, see the use of French as a sign of modernity, and are more likely to embrace its use in the public sphere.

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<sup>68</sup> Azzam Tamimi, *Rachid Ghannouchi: a Democrat within Islamism* (Oxford University Press, 2001), 12-18.

<sup>69</sup> Tamimi, *Rachid Ghannouchi*, 10.

<sup>70</sup> In *al-Maghrib*, unlike in *al-Mashriq*, Arab nationalism never adopted an antagonistic stance towards religion. Tamimi even records that Ghannouchi felt, "Arabism never meant anything other than Islam." Tamimi, *Rachid Ghannouchi*, 21.

<sup>71</sup> At an event with two Ennahda officials, one was asked if she spoke French, to which she replied, "I can, but I prefer not to." The other remarked sarcastically, "What an Islamist!"

In the wake of the revolution, these two camps emerged in the debate over Tunisian identity. Islamists emphasized the Arab and Islamic nature of Tunisian society, while traditional secular urban elites remained loyal to the narrative of a modern and liberal Tunisia. Malika Zeghal (2013) argues that this question of identity (what she calls competing 'ways of life') was the most important and divisive issue of the transition—even more than substantive political issues.<sup>72</sup> This debate on competing ways of life can explain differences of opinion in political debates as well. Both parties claimed to support freedom of expression, but preferred to limit it when they saw that expression as being contrary to Tunisian ideals. Like Islamists opposed the right to insult religion, secularists wanted the state to crack down on ultraconservative preaching in Salafi-dominated mosques. While most secularists do not insult religion and most Islamists disagree with the basis of Salafism, they disagreed over which of the two constituted a 'provocation of violence' and which was protected speech. The question of identity also played a role in resolving the debate on *sharī'a*'s role in the constitution. When talking about the constitution, many young Islamists explained that not including *sharī'a* was not a problem since Tunisia's Arab-Islamic identity is explicitly referenced. They explain that Article 1 declares the Tunisia's religion to be Islam and its language to be Arabic, and that this is sufficient.<sup>73</sup> Even though Article 1's language was not changed from the original 1959 constitution, they still seemed to be happy with what they perceived as a recognition of their Arab-Islamic identity, more than they were upset about the exclusion of *sharī'a*.

While the previous section explained the importance of 'revolutionary' issues to Tunisian Islamists, this section outlined their similarly passionate emphasis of identity. After speaking with and getting to know young Tunisian Islamists, it becomes evident that 'Islamism' in Tunisia has broader connotations than simply the pursuit of political Islam. Rather, it functions as a sort of umbrella for many different ideas, only some of which are related to political Islam. As a label used to group Tunisians according to their political and social views, 'Islamist' connotes not only a belief that Islam has a role to play in politics, but also a fear of losing the goals of the revolution and a pride in Tunisia's Arab and Islamic heritage. It is easy to over-emphasize the purely religious nature of Ennahda, but issues like identity are of equal importance to the party and its members.

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<sup>72</sup> Malika Zeghal, "Competing Ways of Life: Islamism, Secularism, and Public Order in the Tunisian Transition," *Constellations* 20.2 (2013), 255.

<sup>73</sup> It is worth noting that this is a vaguely worded article, and many secularists debate this interpretation.

## Conclusion

This essay has argued that the religious nature of the social phenomenon in Tunisia known as 'Islamism' is too often overstated. While religion plays a key role in their identity and is a part of their political ideology, it is by no means the sole or even primary motivator for most young Islamists. Observers point to Ennahda's departures from hard-line Islamist positions and assert that its constituents must be mad. They are right; many are—especially if you count Salafis as part of that constituency. However, observers acknowledge the compromises Ennahda made on 'revolutionary' issues far less often, and rarely consider how this has affected its base. It is easy and popular to write about Islamists wanting Islam, specifically political Islam, but to pay any real attention to their non-religious priorities would challenge the stereotype of the Islamist one-track mind.

Even when Islamists do talk about Islam, it is often simply a rhetorical legitimization of their non-religious needs and aspirations. Young Islamists from Sidi Bouzid, a poor town on the Tunisia's interior, reference the redistributive economics of *sharī'a* not as a result of their piety, but as a result of their poverty. Islamic rhetoric carries a lot of weight among many Muslims, so Islamists use Islamic rhetoric to promote their interests. But we should not make the analytical mistake of taking them at their word and believing that Islam is their primary motivating factor.

If we are to truly understand Islamists, we need to break out of the analytical blinders that ignore their activity outside the realm of their self-declared ideology. They are dynamic actors that do not limit themselves to the ideological world to which we too often confine them. There is a wonderful scholarly debate (outlined earlier) about what 'Islamism' might mean outside of its traditional expressions. This discourse acknowledges that 'Islamism' is dynamic and that Islamists can interpret and express it in different ways. But beyond this, we also need to acknowledge that Islamists can express themselves politically without it necessarily being an expression of their Islamism (or their 'post-Islamism,' if you subscribe to the idea). Along with being Islamist, they are Tunisians, Muslims, Arabs, politicians, activists, students, workers, refugees, torture victims, unemployed men and women, and the mothers, fathers, children and friends of all of the above. They are driven and shaped by all of these experiences, just as much as (and often more than) they are driven and shaped by their religiosity and political ideology. Thinking otherwise is reductionist and ignores the many non-religious issues that Islamists care about and rally around.

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