

# Political Islamism in Tunisia: A History of Repression and a Complex Forum for Potential Change

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# Political Islamism in Tunisia: A History of Repression and a Complex Forum for Potential Change

## Abstract

This paper argues that the growth and legalization of Political Islamism in Tunisia will naturally hinder the contemporary influence of violent extremism, leading to partnership and inclusion within a Democratic government. The basis for this claim rests on the idea that the condemnation and repression of Political Islamism in Tunisia historically backfired and led to the further underground radicalization of Tunisians, along with scores of human rights abuses by authorities. Specifically, this essay will focus on the moderate Islamist party Ennahda, the Salafist party Ansar al-Sharia, and their complex relationship to each other as well as to domestic and regional politics at large. Furthermore, this essay will examine the wide continuum of Political Islamism at present, including the Tunisian government's most recent agenda regarding its response to violent extremism, terrorism and acts of vigilante violence. This essay advocates for the Tunisian government to continue to allow the participation of Islamist groups within the political arena while maintaining security, transparency, and accountability for the state and its citizens.

## Keywords

Tunisia, Arab Spring, Political Islamism, Ennahda, MTI, Ansar al-Sharia, Salafism, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, Habib Bourguiba, Rachid Ghannouchi, Maghreb, North Africa, MENA, Middle East, Democracy, Terrorism, Anti-Terrorism, Jebel Chambi, Secularism, Extremism, Nidaa Tounes.

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## Cover Page Footnote

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**POLITICAL ISLAMISM IN TUNISIA: A HISTORY OF REPRESSION  
AND A COMPLEX FORUM FOR POTENTIAL CHANGE**

**BY SARAH R LOUDEN**

**ABSTRACT:** This paper argues that the growth and legalization of Political Islamism in Tunisia will naturally hinder the contemporary influence of violent extremism, leading to partnership and inclusion within a Democratic government. The basis for this claim rests on the idea that the condemnation and repression of Political Islamism in Tunisia historically backfired and led to the further underground radicalization of Tunisians, along with scores of human rights abuses by authorities. Specifically, this essay will focus on the moderate Islamist party Ennahda, the Salafist party Ansar al-Sharia, and their complex relationship to each other as well as to domestic and regional politics at large. Furthermore, this essay will examine the wide continuum of Political Islamism at present, including the Tunisian government's most recent agenda regarding its response to violent extremism, terrorism and acts of vigilante violence. This essay advocates for the Tunisian government to continue to allow the participation of Islamist groups within the political arena while maintaining security, transparency, and accountability for the state and its citizens.

**KEYWORDS:** Tunisia, Arab Spring, Political Islamism, Ennahda, Salafism.

**SHORT TITLE:** Political Islamism in Tunisia

Tunisia, located in the heart of what is known geographically as the Maghreb region of North Africa, witnessed a successful overthrow of its president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and his oppressive regime in January of 2011. The uprisings that prompted Ben Ali's removal quickly became attributed to a larger public mobilization in the Middle East known as "The Arab Spring." Tunisia's recent transitional government – the National Constituent Assembly (NCA) – was watched closely not only by the residents of Tunisia, but also by the international community at large. The NCA, which governed from 2011-2014, included a majority block of popularly elected Islamist politicians – who for the first time in Tunisia's history as an independent state were given the legal right to participate in its government. Political Islamism, although frowned upon by much of the Western world out of fear regarding its ties to religious violence, may indeed prosper in post-revolutionary Tunisia. This paper argues that the growth and legalization of Political Islamism in Tunisia will naturally hinder the contemporary influence of violent extremism, leading to partnership and inclusion

within a Democratic government. The basis for this claim rests on the idea that the condemnation of Political Islamism in Tunisia historically backfired and led to the further underground radicalization of Tunisians, along with scores of human rights abuses by authorities. Scholar John Turner regards the theory allowing Islamist parties to participate openly in Tunisian politics as not only a “cure, but rather a beginning to a possibility” of democratic growth and sustainability within the Arab world.<sup>1</sup> This essay will analyze the different historical and contemporary factors that provide evidence for the partnership of Islamism and Democracy. Specifically, this essay will focus on the moderate Islamist party Ennahda, the Salafist party Ansar al-Sharia, and their complex relationship to each other as well as to Tunisian politics at large.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, this essay will examine the wide continuum of Political Islamism at present, including the Tunisian government’s most recent agenda regarding its response to violent extremism.

In order for a democratic government to progress organically in Tunisia, as well as elsewhere in the region, it is necessary for both the West as well as the Arab world to allow political Islamism to grow and advance. If this occurs, then political Islamism can work in cooperation with a democratic governing system, and benefit politicians and citizens alike. Indeed, “of all the developments that have impacted on the politics of the Maghreb states in the post-independence area, none has equaled that of Islamism.”<sup>3</sup> Throughout Tunisia’s independence, Islamist movements witnessed various cycles by the country’s dominating regimes and were seen as a necessary “counterweight to the radical left” opposition.<sup>4</sup> However, whenever a party spoke out or amassed a large following, it was immediately seen as a threat by the regime, and a brutal crackdown ensued. This cycle seemingly came to a halt after Tunisia’s recent uprising in 2011 – when Tunisia’s moderate Islamist party Ennahda gained a majority vote in the state and took power in the transitional government’s NCA. Ennahda led the NCA from November 2011 though January 2014, before an interim independent government took over to lead the state until its late 2014 elections. While the majority leader of the NCA, Ennahda formed a coalition government with two non-Islamist parties – the Congress for the Republic and Ettakatol. However, since 2011 the Tunisian government continues to grapple with divisions among its elected parties, as well as outlying parties including Salafists – some of whom the

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<sup>1</sup> Turner, John. "Untangling Islamism from Jihadism: Opportunities for Islam and the West after the Arab Spring." *Arab Studies Quarterly* 34.3 (2012): 185. Pluto Journals.

<sup>2</sup> Due to the variations in transliteration spellings, the spellings of multiple proper nouns in Arabic – such as Ennahda – have been accordingly adjusted in English to correlate in spelling for the paper’s cohesiveness.

<sup>3</sup> Willis, Michael. *Politics and Power in the Maghreb: Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco from Independence to the Arab Spring.*, (New York: Columbia UP, 2012), 155.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

government labels as violent extremists or jihadists. As Ennahda struggles to maintain popularity and promote its democratic ideals, it must also resist the past errors of Tunisian regimes; while maintaining a safe and transparent political platform, the Tunisian government must continue to allow more conservative Islamist groups into the political arena, so long as they do not pose a threat to the dissolution of the state's democratic stability. Thus, it is necessary to provide free and fair elections where a variety of opinions can be heard and judged openly by the state's residents – and not to preemptively ban political parties purely out of oppositional fear.

### **THE BASIS FOR AN ISLAMIST SOCIETY**

The region known as the Maghreb encompasses the North African states of Mauritania, Libya, Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia. Specifically in Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia, Islamism has come to represent the main opposition force, and thereby constitutes the “most significant political challenge” that each state has grappled with during post-colonialism.<sup>5</sup> Why then, does an Islamic society appeal to so many Tunisians? For many, Islamism “offers voters a strong vision of a just society.”<sup>6</sup> In addition to attracting religious followers, Islamist parties emphasize family values, social conservatism, charitable work and community service – which attract supporters from various classes, regions, and educational levels. Moreover, as Noueihed emphasizes, a vote for an Islamist party is not necessarily seen by the voter as a direct vote for religion, but instead as a vote to reject past despotism and authoritarian regimes.<sup>7</sup> While Tunisia recovers from its prior dictatorship, it is evident that the majority of its population actively fears this kind of authoritarian takeover once again. Therefore, Tunisians are eager to promote a system of checks and balances within their new government. According to scholar Mehdi Mabrouk, the drift towards religious extremism in the state is in fact a “product of the tense and often conflictual relationship between political Islam and the Tunisian regime.”<sup>8</sup> In order to understand the history of modern political Islamism, it is necessary to understand the context in which Islamism emerged in Tunisia, as well as its influence from regional Gulf States. While many scholars with an Orientalist perspective may label Islamism largely as a reaction to colonialism or foreign occupation, more contemporary scholars, such as Willis,

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<sup>5</sup> Willis, 155.

<sup>6</sup> Noueihed, Lin and Alex Warren. *The Battle for the Arab Spring: Revolution, Counterrevolution and the Making of a New Era.*, (New Haven: Yale UP, 2013), 270.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 271.

<sup>8</sup> Mabrouk, Mehdi, “Tunisia: The Radicalization of Religious Policy,” in *Islamist Radicalisation in North Africa: Politics and Process*, ed. George Joffé (New York: Routledge 2012), 49.

Mabrouk, and Turner argue that the mass appeal of Political Islamism – in its various forms – is rather a result of Tunisia’s past (and to a certain extent its ongoing) internal repression of Islam in the political and public realms.<sup>9</sup>

## THE SPECTRUM OF POLITICAL ISLAMISM

Although Western countries and their contemporary Middle Eastern allies have consciously attempted to limit the role of religion in politics, this is a tactic that proves itself to be methodically challenging in the Middle East – where Islam is such an integrated part of many cultures.<sup>10</sup> Within Tunisia, as well as in other states in the region, true diversity within political Islamism exists. Political Islamism, as defined by Noueihed, is a movement that “views Islam as a framework for political and social action and rule, not just personal conduct or spiritual belief.”<sup>11</sup> Moreover, within Political Islamism, a spectrum of levels of observance exists. While some followers, such as Salafists, may hold puritanical views that date back to the practices of early historical Muslims, others support the idea of a moderate Islamic State – where Islam influences the law, but does not literally dictate it. Noueihed notes that these moderate Islamists are “flexible and dynamic,” and “view Islam as constantly evolving and renewing to move with the times.”<sup>12</sup> Political Islam is a term that can be used to refer to “attempts by Muslim individuals, groups, and movements to reconstruct the political, economic, social, and cultural basis of their society along Islamic lines.”<sup>13</sup> Salafism is a conservative offshoot of Islam that is continuing to gain momentum in Tunisia. Although Salafism in Tunisia did not appear widely or publicly until after the 2011 revolution, the trends and ideas were growing underground from as early as the 1980s within the state.<sup>14</sup> Even within Salafism there is a spectrum of belief. Self-proclaimed Salafists primarily believe in “returning to the fundamentals offered by the scriptures and in emulating the behavior and appearance of the earliest Muslims, known as *al-salaf al-salih*, or the righteous predecessors.”<sup>15</sup> Most Salafists believe that a modern Islamic state should still

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<sup>9</sup> In this instance, the term “Orientalist” refers to the ideology in Edward Said’s 1978 book *Orientalism* – specifically referencing someone with an exclusively Euro-centric or Western viewpoint.

<sup>10</sup> Turner, 178.

<sup>11</sup> Noueihed, 264-5.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 265.

<sup>13</sup> Esposito, John L., and Emad El-Din Shahin “Introduction,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Islam and Politics*, ed. Esposito, John L., and Emad El-Din Shahin (New York: Oxford UP, 2013), 1.

<sup>14</sup> Marks, Monica. “Youth Politics and Tunisian Salafism: Understanding the Jihadi Current.” *Mediterranean Politics* 18:1 (2013): 107. Web.

<sup>15</sup> Noueihed, 267.

follow strict Sharia law; however, followers of Salafism differ on their beliefs of how one should go about accomplishing this.

Many critical contemporary scholars “portray neo-imperialist foreign policy practices and the legacy of colonialism as the root cause of the rise of Salafi Jihadism.”<sup>16</sup> However, scholar John Turner argues against this Orientalist rationalization as the only underlying factor in the recent rise of Islamic violence. He goes on to argue that “a deeper investigation into the phenomenon of Salafi Jihadism that does not simply understand Middle Eastern affairs as an extension of Western policy, but as an entity in its own right” is in order.<sup>17</sup> Thus, Turner is among a group of scholars who believe that the rise of violent extremism in the Middle East is due primarily to the region’s exclusion of religion from politics.

Recent popular support for Salafist groups in the Maghreb region has given Salafists an increased visibility – both on a domestic and national scale. In response, citizens within Tunisia who identify as non-traditional or secularist in their political views are continuing to vocalize their fear that Salafists who gain power may attempt to impose strict religious law upon all citizens.<sup>18</sup> Some modern Salafists follow the teachings and beliefs of Islamic reformist Muhammad Rashid Rida (d. 1935). Unlike his predecessor Muhammad ‘Abduh (d. 1905), Rida acutely rejected Islam’s merging with modernism as well as any reliance on Western ideology. During the 1920s, Rida defended the position that “Islamic legal reform required an Islamic government – namely, the restoration of the caliphate.”<sup>19</sup> He believed that the restoration of the caliphate would be superior to Western democracy. Rida’s increasingly conservative views continued until his death; he ultimately supported the idea that the “fundamental sources of Islam,” such as Sharia, “provided a complete code for life.”<sup>20</sup> Rida’s contemporary followers interpret the use of the word *salaf* in a restrictive manner. According to Rida’s literal translation of the term, it may only be used to refer to the first, pious generation of Muslims.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, “while ‘Abduh had advocated a general spirit of intellectual rejuvenation inspired by the Prophet’s early companions, Rida later tended toward a constrained normativity based exclusively on the Qur’an and the traditions of the Prophet and his companions.”<sup>22</sup> Thus, many contemporary scholars may trace the current Salafist movement to Rida’s work in the early

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<sup>16</sup> Turner, 178.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 177-8.

<sup>18</sup> Muasher, Marwan. *The Second Arab Awakening and the Battle for Pluralism*. (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2014), 47.

<sup>19</sup> Saeed, Abdullah “Salafiya, Modernism, and Revival,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Islam and Politics*, ed. Esposito, John L., and Emad El-Din Shahin (New York: Oxford UP 2013), 34-5.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

1900s. However, debate also exists that Salafism's ideological roots may be traced as far back as the medieval period.

### **A STATE-WIDE CRACKDOWN UNDER BOURGUIBA AND BEN ALI**

Following Tunisia's post-colonial independence in 1956, political Islamism was seen as a threat to the government and thus the Bourguiba regime used it as an excuse to rashly "justify and legitimize policies" in the state, often in the name of reformation, modernization, anti-terrorism.<sup>23</sup> "Acting simultaneously as both a cultural initiator and engineer, the Tunisian state sought to reduce the universalist dimensions of Islam horizontally and vertically."<sup>24</sup> Such examples include the dismantling of religious institutions such as the Zaytouna Mosque under Bourguiba's rule.<sup>25</sup> In addition, the 1958 educational reforms ended a thousand-years of tradition of public religious education and teaching within Tunisia.<sup>26</sup> This mandate in effect allowed the Bourguiba regime to control the public sphere of religion. Overall, these reforms symbolized a vital turning point in the devastation of traditional Islam in the state. The reforms led to the regime's "administrative monopolization of Islam," and furthermore included "the termination of religious endowments, the abolition of Qur'anic schools as well as the legal prohibition of any activity in mosques other than prayer. Even religious instruction was subject to prior administrative sanction."<sup>27</sup> Bourguiba's "forceful modernization policies irked the then most dormant religious reformist current in Tunisia."<sup>28</sup> These policies likely influenced formerly moderate Muslims into political – and sometimes violent – action, because they felt that their religion was being both controlled and limited by the ruling regime. Thereby, "the Tunisian religious movement, which was initially concerned with cultural, social, and religious issues, inched its way into the political arena, expressing opposition to the left and later to the increasingly authoritarian state under Bourguiba."<sup>29</sup>

Upon Ben Ali's swift rise to presidency in 1989, thousands of imprisoned *Islamist Mouvement de la Tendence Islamique* (MTI) activists were released, and

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<sup>23</sup> Willis, 157.

<sup>24</sup> Mabrouk, 50.

<sup>25</sup> Historically, the Zaytouna mosque holds a significant affiliation with MTI – *Mouvement de la Tendence Islamique* – the Islamist party's roots were planted by individuals associated with the mosque, who, with a foundation of young students, formed a group that would go on to transform into the Islamist party Ennahda.

<sup>26</sup> Mabrouk, 51.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>28</sup> Layachi, Azzedine. "Islam and Politics in North Africa," in *The Oxford Handbook of Islam and Politics*, ed. Esposito, John L., and Emad El-Din Shahin (New York: Oxford UP 2013), 360.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 361.

hopes for a legitimate multi-party system in Tunisia again seemed probable. Rachid Ghannouchi – one of MTI’s founders – and other MTI members continued to make concessions in hopes of gaining acceptance by Ben Ali. Most notably, the party renamed itself in 1989 as *Ennahda* (Arabic for "renaissance"), with the hope that by toning down its reference to Islam, the party could seek formal recognition by the government.<sup>30</sup> Despite Tunisia’s presidential change, relations between Islamism and the ruling regime continued to regress. During Ben Ali’s political crackdown after the 1989 elections, Ennahda party members suffered repression due to their confrontational approach to Tunisian politics. During this period, Ennahda openly accused Tunisian authorities of electoral fraud, and thereafter saw thousands of its members arrested and often brutally tortured behind prison doors.<sup>31</sup> Ennahda furthermore “accused the government of blocking the emergence of a democracy in Tunisia by excluding Islamists from its conceptualization of pluralism.”<sup>32</sup> The level of confrontation with the state continued to intensify.

Throughout the early 1990s, Ennahda made official statements condemning the use of violence. However, incidents involving party members – including a supposed plot to overthrow the regime – provoked Ben Ali’s government to arrest upwards of 8,000 Ennahda party members between 1991 and 1992.<sup>33</sup> Overall, the political opposition gained such momentum in Tunisia, that the ruling regime could see “no way of coping with its Islamic opponents other than by crushing them.”<sup>34</sup>

In an attempt to yet again “religiously cleanse” Tunisia in the early 1990s, Ali’s regime adopted a policy to “target the ‘sources’ which...fertilized political Islam.”<sup>35</sup> The new program targeted books, school programs, newspapers, and mass media. This “pedagogical purification” went on to include measures that abused the fundamental human rights of Tunisians – such as banning traditional head-shawls and the growing of a beard. However, the de-Islamization process adopted by Tunisia did not rid the state of Political Islamism as intended, but rather had a reverse effect. As explained by Willis: It “encouraged the blossoming of radical Salafism. This was the real and perverse consequence of the cruel and violent cleansing process. The disappearance of Ennahda from the political scene

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<sup>30</sup> Willis, 167.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

<sup>32</sup> Perkins, Kenneth. "Playing the Islamic Card: The Use and Abuse of Religion in Tunisian Politics." *The Making of the Tunisian Revolution: Contexts, Architects, Prospects.* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2013), 70.

<sup>33</sup> Willis, 168.

<sup>34</sup> Perkins, 73.

<sup>35</sup> Mabrouk, 57.

created an ideal opportunity for this alternative radical culture to propagate itself.”<sup>36</sup> The government’s intolerance of Political Islamism and repression of public expression of religion drove any remaining Islamist groups underground, and often spurred animosity in the process. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, “the organizational machinery concerned with the recruiting of sympathizers who could have become Ennahda members has been effectively paralyzed and has, in consequence, yielded to jihadist networks which have been able to appropriate the space left vacant by Ennahda members.”<sup>37</sup> This opinion supports the claim that the Tunisian government’s continued repression towards Islam in the political – as well as the public – sectors, essentially backfired and thereby created a new and more extreme sect of Islamism.

### **THE EFFECTS OF 9/11 ON TUNISIAN POLITICS**

Following the terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001, Ben Ali’s regime brought its anti-Islamist policies to a new level of corruption. The regime used the tactic of fear – specifically fear caused by Islamism – in order to manipulate public opinion and Ben Ali frequently used the threat of Islamist extremism to support his own political agenda and justify his regime’s authoritarian rule.<sup>38</sup> “On the pretext of struggling against religious fundamentalism and terrorism...the dictatorship progressively and methodically succeeded in crushing any political, individual, or organized opposition and in reducing all media to silence.”<sup>39</sup> Moreover, systematic torture became widespread in Tunisia after 9/11, when a hastily created anti-terrorism law was enacted. The vague policies put in place under the name of “anti-terrorism” removed regime and government personnel of any accountability. Ultimately, the law became a “suppressive security policy” that “ended up creating a political vacuum and closed any space for debate,” whereby further repression and media censorship followed.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, the attacks gave Ben Ali’s regime the opportunity to portray itself to Western allies as a “seasoned bulwark against the threat of Islamist extremism.”<sup>41</sup> Under the gaze of Ben Ali’s regime, suspected terrorists during the 1990s and 2000s in Tunisia could be virtually any of the hundreds of

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 60-1.

<sup>38</sup> Arieff, Alexis. “Political Transition in Tunisia.” Rep. no. 7-5700. N.p.: CRS Report for Congress, 2011. Print, 16.

<sup>39</sup> Ayeb, Habib. “Social and Political Geography of the Tunisian Revolution: The Alfa Grass Revolution.” *Review of African Political Economy* 38.129 (2011): 469. Print.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> Willis, 191.

thousands of young Muslim men in the country; such a suspect could be picked up on his way to Mosque one day and systematically tortured in police custody under the guise of anti-terrorism, due entirely to his appearance or moderate religious practices.<sup>42</sup> These policies remained largely in place throughout the next decade, and only now, in the aftermath of Tunisia's uprisings, is the political arena gradually progressing towards a more inclusive body of representation.

### **ENNAHDA'S RISE TO MAJORITY OPPOSITION PARTY**

Although political Islamism was not a definitive force behind the 2011 demonstrations in Tunisia, the political Islamist movement Ennahda nonetheless amassed a substantial following during the years since the ouster of Ben Ali. How exactly did Ennahda turn into Tunisia's most prominent opposition party? Ennahda built its reputation primarily as an "uncompromising opposition movement" during the Ben Ali era.<sup>43</sup> Although the party was illegal for years at a time, strong underground, imprisoned, and exiled movements persisted.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, "many younger people with no connection to historical Ennahda joined after Ben Ali fled the country, bringing their own interpretations of what it means to work for and support an Islamist political project."<sup>45</sup> Tunisia's "new identity model" is both a "rejection of Bourguiba's, which excluded Islam from public life...and the Ben Ali regime, which seemed to celebrate conspicuous consumption and corruption in the name of progress."<sup>46</sup> Thereby, Ennahda's recent political success can be attributed not merely to the party's policy statements or past agenda, but rather due to the fact that the party's ideals and intentions most closely realize those of the voters, and reject the ideologies of the state's previous two regimes.

The October 2011 elections were Tunisia's first "free and transparent" since the state's independence in 1956. Tunisians elected 217 members for a transitional Constituent Assembly. The results of Tunisia's election were surprising to both Tunisians as well as to the international community – Ennahda received 41.7

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<sup>42</sup> Ayeb, 479.

<sup>43</sup> Hostrup Haugbølle, Rikke, and Francesco Cavatorta. "Beyond Ghannouchi: Islamism and Social Change in Tunisia." *Middle East Report* 42, 1.262 (2012): 20. Web.

<sup>44</sup> During its time leading the NCA, Ennahda faced ongoing internal divisions. Many of these divisions may be traced back to the Ben Ali era, when core members of the group were imprisoned for extended periods, and many, including leader Rachid Ghanouchi, sought exile in Arab and Western countries. The Ennahda members who left Tunisia during this time of repression, returned following the Arab Spring, and were accused by purist and traditional Islamists of having adopted a more Westernized ideology while away. While leading the NCA, these internal divisions within Ennahda became more obvious.

<sup>45</sup> Hostrup Haugbølle et al, 20.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

percent of the vote and thereby won 89 seats in the Assembly, making it the majority party. However, many Tunisians, from both secularist and Islamist backgrounds remained skeptical of the party's intentions. Today, Ennahda continues to criticize the use of violence and Islamic militancy. Ghannouchi's vocal criticism of violence in both Islamism and politics, together with his seemingly pro-liberalist attitude "led some Islamists to question his attachment not just to [Political] Islamism, but to Islam itself."<sup>47</sup> Distrust in Islamist parties among secularists and leftists remains prevalent. Many Tunisians are decisively critical of the elected officials from Ennahda. Major fear and concern surround the scenario of what will transpire when Ennahda or other Islamic parties lose their public support; some Tunisians worry the ruling parties will not step down quietly.

### **A COMPLEX RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ISLAMIST PARTIES**

A tense and complex relationship between Ennahda and various Salafist parties, most notably Ansar al-Sharia (AST), continues to exist. AST was founded on the ideology of international jihadism. The origins of the group dates back at least as far as 2006, when political prisoners detained under Ben Ali converged. Following the 2011 revolution, these prisoners were freed under a general amnesty policy, and the group evolved into its present form as a Salafist organization.<sup>48</sup> Following the recent uprising in Tunisia, various Islamist parties attempted to receive recognition and legalization from the state's interim government. Some of these groups continue to be labeled as "extremist," as well as "militant" by the government and news media. Although Ennahda initially supported legalization for many of these opposing parties during 2011-2012, the last two years proved tumultuous in regards to Ennahda's popularity and reputation – as well as to the party's relationship to Salafists.

Until recently, Ennahda viewed the inclusion of Salafist parties as a vital step towards a comprehensive democratic government. Cavatorta outlines Ennahda's agenda regarding Salafism as the following:

First, there is a degree of understanding of the radical positions of the Salafists. Many Ennahda members used to hold similar views in the past and have come around to different methods and policies rather recently. Second, the inclusion of Salafists in the political games might benefit Ennahda electorally, given that the radicalism of Salafists would be neutered; having joined the

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<sup>47</sup> Willis, 191.

<sup>48</sup> Merone, Fabio. "One Last Chance for Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia." Tunisia-live.net. N.p., 30 Aug. 2013. Web. 17 Apr. 2014;

Zelin, Aaron Y. "Tunisia, Uncovering Ansar al-Sharia." *Think Africa Press*. N.p., 25 Oct. 2013. Web. 04 March 2013.

political system, Salafists would no longer seem so radical. Finally, Ennahda can use Salafists to provide a more moderate image of itself, arguing that it is defending democracy and human rights by acting as a rampart against Salafism.<sup>49</sup>

Furthermore, Ennahda worries that banning Salafist groups, such as AST, will merely push the movements further towards violence. Instead, Ennahda – and other moderate Islamist movements – initially encouraged Salafist groups to engage in the democratic arena.<sup>50</sup> Formally recognized Salafi parties continue to lack popular support, especially among younger, more radical Tunisians, who may view the parties as a “contradiction in terms,” and “vehemently reject...the institutionalization of party politics.”<sup>51</sup> While leading the NCA, Ennahda continued to face criticism and skepticism in regards to its relationship to – and tolerance of – Salafist parties. Opponents accused Ennahda of failing to take a hard public stance against Salafi groups suspected of committing violent attacks.

Although rising numbers of Salafi parties were initially welcomed to Tunisia’s new political forum, the parties have since become a growing – and often violent – challenge for Ennahda and Tunisia’s government at large. “At the very least, Tunisian secularists and liberals believe Ennahda has failed to identify and punish Salafi groups or individuals who have violently attacked activists and intellectuals.”<sup>52</sup> Vocal opponents of Ennahda may go so far as to accuse the party of actively engaging in “double-talk – assuring the Tunisian and international communities of its moderate outlook, but using Salafis and their bursts of violence to further Islamic influence in government institutions.”<sup>53</sup> Some opposition groups went so far as to call for Ennahda to step down, as well as for the dissolution of the NCA. Once again, Ennahda conceded to these demands and peacefully stepped down.<sup>54</sup> Opponents argue that Ennahda, in an effort to appeal to a wider

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<sup>49</sup> Cavatorta, Francesco, Fabio Merone, and Stefano M. Torelli. "Salafism in Tunisia: Challenges and Opportunities for Democratization." *Middle East Policy* 19.4 (2012): n.p. Print.

<sup>50</sup> A couple of other, smaller Salafi organizations – *Jibhat al-Islah*, *Hizb al-Asala*, and *Hizb al-Rahma* – have become somewhat integrated into Tunisian politics and are considered legitimate political parties. However, their popular support remains much smaller than that of AST, and they are sometimes viewed disdainfully by hardliner Islamists, similar to the reputation Ennahda has gained in more traditional Islamist circles

<sup>51</sup> Marks, 109.

<sup>52</sup> Muasher, 89-90.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> During the end of September 2013, the Ennahda-led coalition government decided to step down and hand over its power to “an independent caretaker government” that would remain in effect until Tunisia’s 2014 elections (Gall, Carlotta. “Islamist Party in Tunisia to Step Down.” *The New York Times*. N.p., 28 Sept. 2013. Web.

Islamic base, did not take a firm enough stance against Salafism – specifically in connection to AST.<sup>55</sup>

Fabio Merone, a journalist for Tunisia-live.net and a prominent reporter and researcher on Salafism in Tunisia, sums up his thoughts pertaining to the current transitional government's crackdown on Salafism in Tunisia. He states:

Government officials need to address Tunisia's security challenges, but without shutting out religious groups who could still turn out to be peaceful. A nuanced security policy meant to distinguish between Tunisia's enemies and devout masses is needed to prevent escalation and ensure stability.<sup>56</sup>

Moreover, Merone describes AST as a group predominantly comprised of young, working-class Muslims. The political party is "rooted in the disenfranchised neighborhoods of the country. A mix of social marginalization and loss of hope brought many to join its ranks."<sup>57</sup> Despite recent theories and accusations that AST maintains an "armed wing" and preaches violence, Merone argues that Ansar al-Sharia instead supports jihad (literally – "struggle") solely through peaceful means – such as proselytizing, preaching, and organized charity (*dawa*). The party's rhetoric is founded on the Prophet Muhammad's strong concept of patience. Although this may be true in concern to the group's official agenda, skepticism abounds concerning AST's clandestine structure. There continues to be speculation over AST's budget, and where its resources (both monetary and written) come from. Aaron Zelin, among others, claims that much of AST's literature (which is often criticized by opponents as propaganda) is published in Saudi Arabia, and is likely donated to the organization. Additionally, much of AST's food and medicinal provisions appear to be donated by a Kuwaiti Salafi charity.<sup>58</sup> Zelin also attributes funding for new Salafist-supported mosques in Tunisia as being imported from Gulf countries, though concrete proof is difficult to come by.<sup>59</sup> Regional instability continues to affect Tunisia, allowing for the influx of ideologies and outsiders' influential agendas. Gulf countries, specifically

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<sup>55</sup> Ryan, Yasmine. "Rifts Threaten Tunisia's Governing Party." *Al Jazeera*. N.p., 28 Aug. 2013. Web. 06 Mar. 2014.

<sup>56</sup> Merone, Fabio. "Ansar al-Sharia and the War Against Terrorism." *Tunisia-live*. N.p., 10 Mar. 2014. Web. 17 Apr. 2014.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Zelin, Aaron Y. "Meeting Tunisia's Ansar al-Sharia." *Foreign Policy*. N.p., 08 March 2013. Web. 06 March 2015.

<sup>59</sup> Gartenstein-Ross confirms these claims, noting that AST has received medical supplies from a Kuwaiti charity known as RIHS (the Revival of Islamic Heritage Society), and further goes on to trace AST's literature handouts and pamphlets to at least three publishing houses in Saudi Arabia (Gartenstein-Ross, "Ansar al-Sharia").

Saudi Arabia, continue to seek political influence in Tunisia, while rumors of Qatari petrodollars financing Ennahda continue to circulate as well.<sup>60</sup>

### **INTERMITTENT BOUTS OF VIOLENCE INTENSIFY FROM 2012 - PRESENT**

During the last few years, many young Salafists have taken advantage of the “general disorder and the emergence of lawless areas in order to advance Islamic law.”<sup>61</sup> This holds particularly true within Tunisia’s interior regions, where poverty and unemployment are more widespread than in the state’s coastal areas. Prior to late 2012, most occurrences of Salafist violence and unrest have been “more dramatic than deadly,” with unruly protests and threats to Tunisia’s governing body, officials, and high-profile secular activists.<sup>62</sup>

Much of this violence should be considered to be vigilante Salafist violence, meaning it is not necessarily tied to, or carried out by, a specific group (such as AST). However, the perpetrators may often claim to associate with, or be active members of Salafist parties or organizations, which makes their actions more complicated. These acts of religiously motivated violence – which may include public beatings, aggressive protests, threats, or assassinations – predominately target women, secularists, social justice activists, artists, educators, foreigners, Sufis and other religious minorities, as well as more reform-minded Muslims and Imams.<sup>63</sup> However, the incidents that have received the most media attention have been the assassinations of dominant secular politicians, and a violent incident at the U.S. embassy in Tunis on 14 of September 2012. Following the violent protests at the U.S. embassy where two deaths occurred, the Ennahda-led government finally took a firm stance by conducting “sweeping arrests” of Salafists, primarily self-proclaimed members of AST.<sup>64</sup> This massive and sudden series of arrests involved detainment of nearly 200 suspected Salafists on “vaguely substantiated charges,” and ended up resulting in a hunger strike among prisoners, whereby two detainees died.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Awad, Mokhtar, Peter Juul, Brian Katulis, and Hardin Lang. *Center for American Progress*, "Tunisia's Struggle for Political Pluralism After Ennahda." (April 2014), 8.

<sup>61</sup> Crisis Group, "Tunisia: Violence and the Salafi Challenge: Middle East and North Africa Report No. 13713." N.p., 13 Feb. 2013. Web. 6 March 2015.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Gartenstein-Ross, "Ansar al-Sharia."

<sup>64</sup> Although it is unclear if AST acted exclusively as the leader of the Embassy attack, there is evidence that the group "played a major role" in the organization of protests, and the clashes with security forced that escalated into violence. According to eyewitnesses, AST protestors initiated the violence against security that premeditated an attack on the embassy (Gartenstein-Ross et al).

<sup>65</sup> Marks, 112.

Although recent violence at the Algerian border dates back to a Tunisian military officer's death by a militant in December 2012, tensions escalated over the next few months. May, 2013 marks the period when Tunisia's government began to clamp down on Salafists – specifically AST members. That month, a bloody skirmish broke out involving Tunisian security forces and a jihadist group called *Katibat Uqbah Ibn Nafi*, whose members are comprised of Algerian, Tunisian, and Libyan nationals. The incident took place around the Jebel Chambi Mountain on Tunisia and Algeria's border. Tunisian forces allegedly attacked the area with heavy artillery in order to uncover jihadist-training camps. The security operation lasted approximately two weeks, and both sides endured heavy injuries, with five Tunisian soldiers reportedly requiring limb amputations after the event due to the presence of improvised explosive devices. Just two months later, in July, yet another attack occurred in the Jebel Chambi region, this time militants killed eight Tunisian soldiers – five of whom had their throats slit.<sup>66</sup> Although the Tunisia government linked AST to the violence at Jebel Chambi, AST's leaders deny these accusations and have not sought recognition for the aforementioned attacks.

Moreover, two high-profile political assassinations in 2013 caused a major blow to the public's confidence in its government. On February 6, 2013, secularist politician Chokri Belaïd was shot and killed. Directly following the murder, Tunisia witnessed a massive eruption as one million outraged and grieving citizens took to the streets in protest. Much of their anger and grief was directed at the ruling Ennahda government, believing the party was too "soft" on Salafists and violent Islamists, and that enough precaution wasn't taken to prevent the murder. Approximately six months later, on July 25, Mohammed Brahmî – another secularist politician – was murdered. More protests broke out across the state, including angry calls from protesters demanding the government's resignation. In response, the government went on to publicly link AST to both the assassinations, as well as the violent attacks at Jebel Chaambi. On August 27, AST was formally labeled a terrorist organization. Many questions remain unanswered regarding the multiple bloody attacks. It seems likely that members of AST are linked to the murders, but there is less evidence that AST as a group formally ordered or organized the killings. Some critics of the government believe that the blame is being placed too quickly on a perpetrator (in this case, AST) in order to deflect blame from the government, and to maintain an illusion of security in the unstable state.<sup>67</sup> Conspiracy theories and blame linked to the

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<sup>66</sup> Gartenstein-Ross, Daveed, Bridget Moreng, and Kathleen Soucy. *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism - The Hague*, "Raising the Stakes: Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia's Shift to Jihad." N.p., February 2014. Web. 06 March 2015.

<sup>67</sup> Gartenstein-Ross, et al.

multiple violent murders in 2013 protruded in various directions. While some secularists blamed Ennahda outright for the assassinations, multiple members of Ennahda actually voiced concerns that members of the “old regime” manipulated or coerced Salafists to commit the acts of violence in order to emphasize the fragility and insecurity of the state.<sup>68</sup>

Since May of 2013, over 2,000 Salafis have been arrested for either direct or indirect involvement in various acts of violence.<sup>69</sup> Is the “hard-line” approach working? Or is the Tunisian government continuing to disenfranchise its younger, struggling, more impressionable citizens and lose their support to extremist organizations? One of Tunisia’s ‘most wanted men,’ Ahmed Rouissi, was killed recently fighting for The Islamic State (referred to as both “ISIL” and “ISIS”). The Tunisian government believed he was involved in the 2013 political assassinations of Belaïd and Brahmi. As of yet, no one has been convicted for these murders, so it remains questionable what the mass arrests of Salafists from 2013 - 2015 accomplished.

#### **YET ANOTHER CYCLE OF RELIGIOUS OPPRESSION?**

Tunisia’s recent crackdown on Salafism, including the branding of AST as an illegal terrorist organization, is extremely reminiscent of the state’s previous banning of MTI (and Ennahda) decades earlier – including the mass-arrests and broad accusations brought upon the party’s members. Rather than allowing the party to continue operating publicly with some degree of transparency, the government has instead pushed AST underground while thereby “encouraging small groups of radicalized people to move without a political guide.”<sup>70</sup> Although splinter organizations with extremist members have been identified as threats to the state - as well as to the security of secular and leftist Tunisian politicians – no evidence has yet been presented publicly to link the Salafist party Ansar al-Sharia to violent activity or state terrorism per se. While violent acts of extremism associated with both groups and individuals should be watched closely, attention should also be paid to the state’s police and security responses. Merone writes:

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<sup>68</sup> Boukhars, Anouar. *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, "In the Crossfire: Islamists' Travails in Tunisia." (Jan. 2014). Web, 8.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>70</sup> Merone, "Ansar al-Sharia," *ibid.*

We cannot settle the question [of Salafism or jihadism] by simply saying that these are ‘terrorist groups’ that have to be eliminated from society. More consciousness of the need to integrate these young people is needed, along with an open cultural debate: Islam must be discussed openly in order for it to evolve in Tunisia’s new democratic context.<sup>71</sup>

Merone maintains, “There is no solution but accountability,” and goes on to emphasize that “the only way to overcome the crisis is to open up room for mediation that will allow the moderate camp within Ansar al-Sharia to develop a clear platform condemning violence in order to declare itself a legal organization.”<sup>72</sup> If this happens, then AST will be able to interact with transparency within Tunisia’s future democratic government as well as its society.

During these recent years of vigilantism and violence, the government has frequently been accused of not taking a hard enough stance on Salafists, and the police and security forces within the state have repeatedly come under scrutiny for their lukewarm response and inaction, especially by the international Human Rights Watch (HRW) organization. In order to maintain safety and security in Tunisia, especially among its minorities and vulnerable citizens, the state must do more to train and support its police at a local and national level, while maintaining transparency rather than promoting mass arrests and incarcerations under the guise of “anti-terrorism,” as occurred in the two prior administrations. “In order to blunt the force of Salafi-associated unrest, the Tunisian government must adopt a transparent and consistent policy to enforce the rule of the law.”<sup>73</sup>

### **CHANGES IN THE GOVERNMENT SINCE LATE 2013**

The NCA finally approved Tunisia’s new constitution on January 25, 2014. In response to the finalization of the constitution, the World Bank and International Monetary Fund released and approved significant funds for Tunisia’s new interim government.<sup>74</sup> Shortly thereafter, on March 5, President Marzouki lifted the official state of emergency in Tunisia, which had been in effect since the 2011 uprising.

The year 2014 marked Tunisia’s first free and open election for president since the state’s independence from France in 1956. The peaceful elections have been labeled a “landmark vote for democracy in the country where the Arab Spring was

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<sup>71</sup> Merone, “One Last Chance.”

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Marks, 113.

<sup>74</sup> Awad et al, 6.

born.”<sup>75</sup> The election involved both mudslinging by the top candidates and polarization of “Islamists” versus “Secularists.” Essebsi’s Nidaa Tounes party is viewed by critics as a return to the former establishment of the Ben Ali regime, while opponent Moncef Marzouki’s Congress for the Republic party was labeled by Essebsi and his supporters as “Islamist” and “extremist,” despite the fact that the party self-identifies as a center-left secularist party, rather than an Islamist one.<sup>76</sup> Marzouki held the position of President during Tunisia’s interim Constituent Assembly government from 2011-2014 (he was elected by the Assembly, rather than in an open public election). Although Marzouki is not a member of the Ennahda party, he worked with them during his recent time in office from 2011-2014. Tunisia’s 2014 parliamentary election results shocked many analysts – the Nidaa Tounes party defeated Ennahda to win 85 of 217 legislature seats. The Nidaa Tounes party is made up of a combination of former Ben Ali regime figures as well as secular leftists politicians. Ennahda won 70 seats, with the remaining seats distributed to multiple smaller parties. Although some Tunisians feared that once in power, Ennahda would not step down quietly, this proved to be inaccurate. Ennahda did not resist defeat and congratulated Nidaa Tounes following the announcement of the election results. While Nidaa Tounes initially stood its ground in opposition to coalition building within the parliament, the party eventually accepted a unity government proposal that included members of Ennahda.<sup>77</sup> Overall, the voter turnout for the 2014 election was only 67 and 60 percent for the presidential and legislative votes respectively, far lower than the 90 percent voter turnout following the revolution in 2011.<sup>78</sup>

## PROSPECTS FOR ESCALATION

The violent attack at the Bardo Museum on the 18th of March 2015 targeted a symbolic venue – a national museum next to the Tunisian Parliament – as well as the state’s vital tourism industry. The majority of the attack’s 23 victims were

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<sup>75</sup> "Africa Research Bulletin 20387: Political, Social, and Cultural Series." *Africa Research Bulletin*. no. 12 (2015): 20387A-20388B.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Dhaouadi, Rim, and Karina Piser. "Setback for Tunisia's Islamists portends a partisan political turn." *Al Jazeera America*, N.p., 30 Oct. 2014. Web. 06 March 2015.

<sup>78</sup> The voter turnout for the 2014 presidential elections was lowest in Sidi Bouzid – at a turnout of 43.6%. This is significant, as Sidi Bouzid represents the starting point of the Arab Spring – where riots broke out after street vendor Mohammad Bouazizi self-immolated himself in protest against what he viewed as harassment and a lack of human dignity. The low voter turnout may be interpreted as a protest from residents of the interior Tunisian city who view the current government and major political parties as a far cry from what passionate Tunisians took to the streets for in 2011 – when protesters demanded an end to political corruption, cronyism, and repression.

foreign tourists. During the time of the attack, the Tunisian parliament reportedly met to discuss new anti-terrorism legislation that would affect police and military as well as “give the [state’s] security forces greater leeway to crack down on radicalization.”<sup>79</sup> Tunisian protestors continue to voice their dissatisfaction with the current and previous administrations, placing the blame for the attack on the government. Although Ennahda previously opposed further anti-terrorism legislation, the party is now speaking up in support of the new anti-terrorism agenda.

With an estimated 3,000 Tunisians fighting abroad in Syria, Libya, Iraq and other MENA countries, it should not come as a surprise that previous followers and members of AST are now joining the more radical and violent groups waging war regionally, such as The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant and Jabhat al-Nusra.<sup>80</sup> It seems that AST has provided a catalyst for violent Tunisian extremists to connect with other regional Islamist groups – many of whom have much more violent agendas and are actively recruiting fighters. The day after the Bardo Museum attack, ISIL (also referred to as ISIS) claimed responsibility. The two gunmen responsible for the attack were killed at the scene, and nine further arrests were made shortly thereafter.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Both Ennahda, and the new ruling party Nidaa Tounes must form a productive unity government that restores justice and public confidence within the state. The new government must establish firm security policies while seeking a compromise between being seen as “soft” on or “sympathetic” to Salafists, and refrain from the manipulation of “anti-terrorism” laws in order to further its own political agenda or conduct sweeping, repressive arrests without the agency for fair, transparent trials. “To deal with the problem of radical Salafism, the Tunisian government has to undertake security sector reform and address the socioeconomic conditions that drive people toward extremist positions,” furthermore, the government must attempt to “restore state authority without falling into the traps of overreaction, abuse of human rights, and indiscriminate repression” which plagued the state during the past fifty years.<sup>81</sup> The root of vigilante violence and radicalization of Tunisians appears to stem predominantly from socioeconomic conditions, rather than religion itself. Vulnerable individuals and communities may thereafter adopt

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<sup>79</sup> Lewis, Aidan. “Tunisia Museum Attack: ‘Arab Spring’ Pioneer Under Threat.” *BBC News*. N.p., 19 March 2015. Web.

<sup>80</sup> Walt, Vivienne. “Attack sharpens Tunisia’s dilemma over a crackdown on extremism.” *Al Jazeera America*. N.p., 19 March 2015. Web.

<sup>81</sup> Boukhars, 4.

radical political and religious beliefs and agendas as they feel they have been let down by their society and government. In order for a coalition or unity government to be successful it must strive to overcome the polarizing distinction between Islamists and secularists and instead work collaboratively to improve the lives of Tunisian citizens on multiple levels.

Despite the fact that Tunisia's political transition was not flawless, it was indeed peaceful and transparent and will ideally set the stage for other regional neighbors to follow in the near future. Does the new government represent a return to the old regime? It is too soon to say, but the mere fact that the ruling government is inclusive of moderate Islamists and smaller independent parties is promising for the country's future, which will hopefully be more open to dialogue regarding political and religious diversity. Democratic change in a formerly authoritarian nation will only emerge gradually – much like it has developed in other countries. In order for a new government to succeed, the West must accept the elected governing bodies as the genuine voice of the voters and citizens of each individual society. Moreover, while it is tempting to hold Tunisia and its neighboring post-revolutionary states up to unrealistic standards and ideals, it is vital to remember that long-established Western (and Eastern) countries have only reached democratic governments through centuries of racism, sexism, slavery, and genocide. As noted by scholar Noueihed, “A new political system can be installed in a short time, but social customs and prejudices are often much slower to change.”<sup>82</sup> Although it is crucial to allow a natural cycle of political triumphs and failures to occur within a newly independent nation, it is also essential for Ennahda, Nidaa Tounes, and their coalition government to not automatically heed to media or international pressure against political parties that are attempting to participate in the state's political arena. Within Tunisia's current political landscape there remains hope that democratic principles will spread throughout the Middle East and that “violent Islamism will be dealt a heavy blow not by the West, but by the people of the Middle East themselves...Which form of political Islam comes to gain the strongest appeal in the future will depend in part on whether or not Political Islam is afforded a legitimate place in the governments of the future.”<sup>83</sup> Although it is difficult at this point in time to draw a concrete conclusion pertaining to the future of Salafism – or political Islamism at large – in Tunisia's political landscape, it is necessary to watch and indeed question the state's treatment of all current political parties and Islamist movements.

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<sup>82</sup> Noueihed, 278.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 177-8.

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