



**CARNEGIE**  
ENDOWMENT FOR  
INTERNATIONAL PEACE



# **THE RECKONING**

## **Tunisia's Perilous Path to Democratic Stability**

**Anouar Boukhars**

APRIL 2015



**CARNEGIE**  
ENDOWMENT FOR  
INTERNATIONAL PEACE

---

# **THE RECKONING**

## **Tunisia's Perilous Path to Democratic Stability**

Anouar Boukhars

© 2015 Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. All rights reserved.

Carnegie does not take institutional positions on public policy issues; the views represented herein are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect the views of Carnegie, its staff, or its trustees.

No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without permission in writing from the Carnegie Endowment. Please direct inquiries to:

Carnegie Endowment for International Peace  
Publications Department  
1779 Massachusetts Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20036  
P: +1 202 483 7600  
F: +1 202 483 1840  
[CarnegieEndowment.org](http://CarnegieEndowment.org)

This publication can be downloaded at no cost  
at [CarnegieEndowment.org/pubs](http://CarnegieEndowment.org/pubs).

# Contents

About the Author	v
Summary	1
Introduction	3
The Pull of the Past	4
Populism at the Polls	5
Deep-Seated Polarization	7
Dissent in the Ranks	9
Divisions Within Ennahdha	10
Shifting Frontiers of Islamism	14
Insecurity and Terrorism	15
Jihadism and Organized Crime	18
Economic Strains	19
Conclusion	20
Notes	23
Carnegie Endowment for International Peace	28



---

## About the Author

**Anouar Boukhars** is a nonresident scholar in Carnegie's Middle East Program. He is also an associate fellow at FRIDE and associate professor of International Relations at McDaniel College in Westminster, Maryland.

Boukhars is a former fellow at the Brookings Doha Center and author of *Politics in Morocco: Executive Monarchy and Enlightened Authoritarianism* (Routledge, 2010). He is also a co-editor of *Perilous Desert: Sources of Saharan Insecurity* (with Frederic Wehrey, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2013) and *Perspectives on Western Sahara: Myths, Nationalisms and Geopolitics* (with Jacques Roussellier, Rowman and Littlefield, 2013). His other publications have appeared in a large number of journals and leading newspapers, including the *Journal of Conflict Studies*, *International Political Science Review*, *European Security*, *Terrorism Monitor*, and Columbia International Affairs Online.



---

## Summary

For Tunisia, 2014 was a year of historic milestones. But despite a new constitution and free elections that led to the peaceful transfer of power to the secular Nidaa Tounes party, the democratic consensus forged after the country's 2011 revolution remains fragile. The hard work of reconciling a deeply polarized society—one torn between Islamists and secularists, young and old, democrats and counterrevolutionaries, cosmopolitan coastal areas and the underdeveloped interior and south—still lies ahead.

### Risks of Social and Regional Fragmentation

- Tunisia is divided by a generation gap. Young people are struggling to find jobs and feel alienated from politics, which is dominated by old faces and old ways of doing business.
- Tunisia's developed north and neglected south are far apart ideologically and socially. These deep-rooted schisms were long overshadowed by a contentious debate over religious rights and individual liberties, but they surfaced during the 2014 elections.
- This sense of disgruntlement and exclusion partly explains the growing appeal of extremist groups in Tunisia's poor neighborhoods and marginalized regions.
- The debate over political Islam is not settled. There is sharp disagreement within the Islamist Ennahdha movement and in broader Tunisian society about the role of religion in politics.
- As Tunisia's new leaders try to contain the effects of regional turmoil and combat escalating terror attacks by fragmented jihadi groups, they may be tempted to weaken checks on their power and marginalize political Islam. Those moves would threaten the country's great experiment in fostering inclusiveness and building political consensus.

### Recommendations for Tunisia's Leaders and Outside Supporters

**Nidaa Tounes should be as magnanimous in victory as its opponents were gracious in defeat.** The first task for Tunisia's new rulers is to find equilibrium among the country's multiple opposing forces and aspirations.

**Economic reform should be a priority.** The new executive and legislative branches must put in place policies to decentralize the government and lure foreign investment to marginalized interior and border regions.

**The international community should encourage Tunisia's domestic reforms and democratic consolidation.** The United States and its democratic partners should provide Tunisia with a package of loans and grants to improve democratic governance, security, and economic development. They should also prod the new government to seize the opportunity of low oil prices to cut subsidies and enact other structural reforms.

**The United States and its allies must keep a watchful eye on Tunisia's fight against terrorism.** Any political backsliding or human rights violations by Tunisian authorities under the pretext of fighting terror should not be tolerated.

---

## Introduction

For those of us condemned to hope, the year 2014 was an incredible moment. Despite the depressing chaos, dreadful violence, and democratic setbacks in much of the Arab world, Tunisia, the birthplace of the Arab Spring, witnessed a year of eye-catching political milestones. After a historic compromise on a liberal and democratic constitution in January, Tunisia held parliamentary elections in October. That vote saw the defeat of the Islamist Ennahdha movement, which had held the most seats in parliament. Tunisia's Islamists gracefully accepted the electoral result and gave up power, refuting the oft-repeated doctrine put forth by former U.S. ambassador Edward P. Djerejian that Islamists would only allow "one person, one vote, one time."<sup>1</sup>

Tunisia then made another step in its momentous democratic transition, successfully holding a fiercely contested, free, and fair presidential election in November and a runoff in December. Tunisia's main secular party, Nidaa Tounes (Call for Tunisia), emerged victorious in the parliamentary elections, and its eighty-eight-year-old founder, Beji Caid Essebsi, was elected president.

The Arab world has a lot to learn from Tunisia's exercise in the politics of moderation and the art of compromise. But it is important not to get carried away by the historic moments of 2014, nor to grow complacent about the durability of Tunisia's democratic experiment since the ouster of former president Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali in 2011. Indeed, multiple cleavages and animosities surfaced with a vengeance in the presidential election, illustrating the fragility of Tunisia's democratic consensus and the continuing risks of social and regional fragmentation. Now that Tunisia has successfully completed its transitional phase, the hard political work of reconciling a deeply polarized society—one torn between Islamists and secularists, democrats and counter-revolutionaries, cosmopolitan coastal areas and the underdeveloped interior and south—still lies ahead.

Emerging democracies have often been badly wounded by the temptation of crude majoritarianism, and by the inability to deliver the essence of what people expect from their government. The first institutionalizes political extremism and exclusion, while the second breeds cynicism and public disaffection.

These are indeed significant dangers that confront Tunisia's new leadership. After its electoral triumph, the secularist camp must now exercise restraint and honor its pledges of democracy and commitment to pluralism and human rights. Despite their flaws and their turbulent stint in government, the Islamists

---

**The Arab world has a lot to learn from Tunisia's exercise in the politics of moderation and the art of compromise.**

---

of the Ennahdha movement have shown their capacity for compromise, inclusivity, and restraint at times of great tension.

Regional turmoil and the growing threat posed by fragmented jihadi groups will also test the government as it seeks to ensure stability and security. The response to the March 2015 terrorist assault on the National Bardo Museum in Tunis that left at least twenty tourists dead will provide an early gauge of the new leadership's commitment to the rule of law. The attack was the first major assault on civilians since a 2002 suicide bombing at a synagogue on the Tunisian island of Djerba in which nineteen people died.

The temptation among Tunisia's non-Islamist elected leaders to weaken the constitutional checks on their power in the name of restoring the state and fighting terrorism could be difficult to resist.<sup>2</sup> Equally enticing for the most radical elements of the secularist camp is the use of undemocratic means to try to marginalize political Islam. The appointment of Habib Essid, a former minister of the interior under Ben Ali who embraces the security-first approach, as prime minister has already prompted fears of a return to repression.

Tunisia's daunting economic problems pose a further challenge. The elections laid bare significant divisions and antagonisms between the developed north and neglected south of the country. The results also revealed a widening divide between younger and older Tunisians. The youth's detachment from the political scene, which is still dominated by politicians from the old generation, was reflected in much lower turnout levels among younger voters.<sup>3</sup> This generation gap and the persistence of regional inequality and polarization fuel the political instability and violent extremism facing Tunisia.

The sustainability of transitional political regimes depends on leadership, economic growth, the influence of regional and international factors, and sheer luck. How Tunisia's democratic experiment will unfold is still unknown. The transition remains shaky and vulnerable to both internal and external shocks.

---

## **Tunisia's transition remains shaky and vulnerable to both internal and external shocks.**

---

## **The Pull of the Past**

Among Tunisians, the excitement and pride generated by the historic votes of 2014 are laced with anxiety about the state of the country. Adjusting to turbulent times has been difficult for most. As postrevolutionary governments stumbled, labor markets suffered, and insecurity rose, growing numbers started to question whether the new political regimes were improvements over their authoritarian predecessor. This led to a troubling but predictable pattern: as frustrations mounted, cynicism toward politics became more entrenched, and it was accompanied by bittersweet pangs of nostalgia for the old order.<sup>4</sup>

Polls show that most Tunisians yearn for equilibrium between emblems of the past and passions for a better future. A 2014 Pew Research Center survey

found that 62 percent of Tunisians preferred stability over democracy, while a similar number supported the main pillars of a democratic system, such as an uncensored media (63 percent), freedom to protest (68 percent), and gender equality (66 percent).<sup>5</sup>

Nidaa Tounes is the incarnation of this conflicting desire to reunite the old social template with present aspirations for change. Since the party's creation in 2012 as a counterweight to political Islam, Essebsi has cloaked himself in the mantle of Habib Bourguiba, the builder of modern-day Tunisia, as carefully as he has distanced himself from Bourguiba's excesses and cruel disinclination to share power.<sup>6</sup>

Nidaa Tounes carries both the trappings of the old and the temptations of the new. It advances a conservative modernist ideology that attempts to preserve the established order of things while remaining open to innovation.<sup>7</sup> The discourse of the party revolves around protecting the positive aspects of the ancien régime in the areas of women's rights, economic stability, education, and public security, while stomping out its ugly side.

Bourguiba's pursuit of authoritarian modernity scored some institutional and societal victories. But, over time, his ability to modernize Tunisia's social structure was severely undermined by ideological rigidity and political unaccountability, which bred corruption, waste, and abuse. "In the decades of dictatorship," said Tunisian literary scholar Hélé Béji, who is related to Habib Bourguiba, "politics lost its moral compass. Everything—even the gravest injustices—was allowed for the sake of the state."<sup>8</sup>

Essebsi channeled Bourguiba in his campaign to restore the prestige of the state, revive Tunisia's economic potential, and preserve women's rights. But he was clever enough to craft a public image of flexibility and pragmatism. Unlike Bourguiba, who built his system on repression of dissent and persecution of Islamists, Essebsi said he accepts Islamists as part and parcel of the Tunisian political landscape. "We are political adversaries, not enemies," Essebsi stated in several interviews.<sup>9</sup>

## Populism at the Polls

Nidaa Tounes's victory in 2014's parliamentary and presidential elections marked the success of an old strain of national populism that relied on the politics of fear and a promise to restore the authority of the state. The party's rallying cry was simple and grim: everything in the country is broken. In campaign rallies, Essebsi accused Ennahdha of leaving the country at the breaking point after it led the government, from November 2011 to January 2014. The party's ineptitude, complacency, and other transgressions, he lamented, had left Tunisians vulnerable to terrorism and economic destabilization.

Nidaa Tounes benefited from a successful mobilization of international support, especially from the Gulf countries and Egypt, which provided critical

financial and logistical assistance to defeat the Islamists.<sup>10</sup> The media also fueled the public's fears and cemented the impression that Tunisia was perilously off track. In the end, this kind of apocalyptic politics proved potent in motivating not only Nidaa's anti-Islamist base but also an appreciable number of Tunisians who decided to validate the comeback of the old guard, seeing Nidaa as the only realistic option to win the election and put the country back on the path to economic stability and security.<sup>11</sup>

Ennahdha also deployed populist appeals for electoral purposes, and while some of its voters supported the party because of ideology, others mobilized because they feared the return of authoritarianism.

Despite a turbulent two years in power marred by a sluggish economy, rising insecurity, escalating social tensions, and a predominantly hostile media, Ennahdha remains an important pillar in society and politics. This is indeed one of the main lessons of the elections. While the Islamists were knocked into second place in the parliamentary vote, with 69 seats (to 86 for Nidaa Tounes), they could have performed much worse, given the electorate's discontent.<sup>12</sup> But Ennahdha smartly crafted a narrative of defense against the return of authoritarian leaders who would subvert Tunisia's democratic progress and undermine its traditional values.

Throughout the parliamentary campaign, the Islamists emphasized their role in Tunisia's transition, arguing that they were the only actor to display national responsibility and place the national interest above the party's interest. The subtext in this narrative was that Ennahdha was Tunisia's moral watchdog, safeguarding political liberties and religious freedom.<sup>13</sup>

This also helps explain why the Islamists threw their support behind the presidential candidacy of Moncef Marzouki, the sixty-nine-year-old outgoing interim president and staunch secular defender of human rights. Though Ennahdha did not officially endorse a candidate, its base and sympathizers strongly lined up behind Marzouki, who was seen as the last bulwark against the return of authoritarianism.

Other strains of populism were also at play.

Slim Riahi, a successful businessman and owner of a major soccer club, founded the Free Patriotic Union in May 2011, and the party made a surprising showing in the 2014 legislative elections. Riahi, who was the party's presidential candidate, understood that some young Tunisians were more interested in prosperity, sports, and entertainment than in messy politics.

Riahi's political style corresponds fairly well with Tunisians' widespread public cynicism. For all his ambiguities and penchant for glitz—his critics denounce him for what they say is his opportunism, fiendish ambition, and lack of political conviction—his supporters, mostly young soccer fans, see dynamism, guts, and a can-do businessman whose ingenuity and wealth could lift Tunisia out of its economic morass. Riahi's youth also sets him apart from the dinosaurs that still dominate Tunisia's political landscape. And while his grand promises of defeating terrorism in six months and creating tens of

thousands of jobs might have been simplistic, they resonated nonetheless with a segment of the electorate.

The success of Riahi's party, which came in third with 16 seats out of 217, is not out of the ordinary. Other soccer club executives were also successful in their political pursuits: the former president of Club Sportif Sfaxien, Moncef Sellami, and the current president of l'Etoile du Sahel were both elected in the 2014 legislative elections.<sup>14</sup> And in the October 2011 elections for the National Constituent Assembly, a business magnate and owner of a television channel, Hechmi Hamdi, stunned observers when his populist list came in second.<sup>15</sup>

Reading Tunisia's 2014 election results through a populist lens helps to make sense of the results. In the end, this was a vote that lacked secular passion or Islamist sentimentality. Instead, buffeted by economic distress and threats of insecurity, Tunisians either abstained from voting or backed magicians who promised them security, probity, and prosperity.<sup>16</sup> A cranky electorate rebuked the Islamists and bitterly punished two secular parties that had been their coalition partners: Marzouki's Congress for the Republic Party held on to a paltry four seats of the 30 it had in the outgoing National Constituent Assembly, while the leftist Ettakatol lost all of its 21 seats.

The result is that four years after Tunisia shrugged off authoritarian rule, the old faces and old ways of conducting politics have returned in force. Most of the debates that are taking place are the product of the same politicians and the same ideological divisions that were present in the 1970s. And the few politicians of a new breed that have emerged are having trouble muscling in on this old-style politics characterized by patronage and the cult of personality.

---

**Four years after Tunisia shrugged off authoritarian rule, the old faces and old ways of conducting politics have returned in force.**

---

## Deep-Seated Polarization

While populism helps explain the results of Tunisia's 2014 elections, the votes also show that regional polarization and class divisions remain defining features of the country.<sup>17</sup> Tunisia's impoverished interior and south are ideologically and socially far apart from the coastal north. Indeed, the presidential election results—showing strong support in the south for Marzouki, while the north chose Essebsi—make Tunisia look more like two nations.

This deep-seated division is not new. Both Bourguiba, who was removed from office in 1987, and Ben Ali intentionally marginalized the southern Sfax Governorate despite its economic dynamism and entrepreneurial spirit. By contrast, the city of Sousse, known as “the pearl of the Sahel,” the central region along Tunisia's eastern coast, benefited disproportionately from public infrastructure and other investments. This disparity generated fierce regional discontent and political dismay, and made Sfax—home to Tunisia's second largest city—in the words of Fabio Merone at Belgium's Ghent University,

“the symbol of the political and economic discrimination of the southern part of the country.”<sup>18</sup>

During the 2014 campaign, Marzouki’s formula—emphasizing social identity, economic grievances, and democratization—was designed to make a rational and emotional appeal to disaffected populations and neglected regions of the country. His populist worldview rested on a Manichean distinction between democratic revolutionaries and counterrevolutionaries, ordinary citizens and the elite, the marginalized south and the privileged north, and it mobilized voters along regional and class lines. Marzouki’s supporters hailed overwhelmingly from the south of the country and underprivileged urban zones of northern cities. Most were single, young, male, and fiercely anties-establishment.<sup>19</sup> Some of his voters belonged to the bourgeoisie anchored in the southeast, especially in the Sfaxian region, and they were deeply resentful of the more privileged Sahel region.

Marzouki, who is from the south, was seen as an alternative to the power structures that have dominated Tunisia since independence in 1956, in which elites from the capital, Tunis, and the coastal areas of the Sahel region played a leading role.<sup>20</sup> While the 2011 revolution created new democratic space that allows for political competition and civil society action, it did not change this hegemonic order whose members share common interests, class identities, and worldviews.

Power in Tunisia has always been confined to demographically narrow strata of society that are interdependent and interlocked. These same elites, who alternate between competition and coordination, still dominate the economy and enjoy strong connections with international circles of influence. Worse, many of the most compromised elite of the old regime still hold leadership positions in the bureaucracy and media.<sup>21</sup>

For Tunisia’s southern bourgeoisie, Essebsi’s victory only perpetuates the same crony capitalism that has entrenched political favoritism and corruption in spending and the granting of government contracts for decades, all at the expense of the south of the country. They fear it might also delay or derail the implementation of political and fiscal decentralization enshrined in the new constitution.

The ideological antipathy and social schisms that divide the north and south have their roots in old divisions that tore the nationalist movement for independence of the 1950s into two regionally divergent ideological and political interests. At that time, there was a fierce struggle between Bourguiba and Salah Ben Youssef, another nationalist leader, for dominance over the state apparatus and resources and control of the Neo-Destour Party—which would later become the Constitutional Democratic Rally party and was Tunisia’s ruling party from independence through the 2011 revolution. The ensuing battles led to near-civil war between Ben Youssef’s supporters—including members of the religious establishment, traditional merchants, and the old commercial elite of the south and his native Djerba, off the southeast coast of Tunisia—and

defenders of Bourguiba, including modern professionals, landowners, and members of the petite bourgeoisie in the coastal Sahel.

Bourguiba and his Sahel clan emerged victorious from this power struggle, subduing—thanks to French military support—a southern rebellion and forcing Ben Youssef to flee into exile in Germany, where he was assassinated in 1961. Ben Youssef remains a hero to many in the south and Marzouki, whose father was a partisan of Ben Youssef, tapped into this heritage by portraying himself as a custodian of Ben Youssef's legacy and guardian of the south's interests and liberties.<sup>22</sup> Essebsi, on the other hand, built up the legacy of his mentor, Bourguiba.

These deep-rooted regional divisions and distrust over who controls political power and receives government largesse were long overshadowed by Tunisia's highly contentious and emotive debate over religious rights and individual liberties. The 2014 elections laid bare the concerns of the old establishment in the north, which fears that any electoral power shift might prove destabilizing and detrimental to its economic interests, as well as the aspirations of the provincial masses of the south to gain a political voice and improve the standing of their region.

## Dissent in the Ranks

Since Ben Ali's ouster, Tunisia's crisis resolution and political decisionmaking have essentially been an elite affair, as key political leaders sought compromise to defuse tensions and keep the country on its democratic course.<sup>23</sup> And Tunisia earned deserved widespread praise and congratulations from the international community for its moderation, restraint, common sense, and realism. There is still a lot riding on the continuation of these pragmatic and deliberative approaches to consensus building. But rising dissension among the rank and file of Tunisia's major political organizations could make them difficult to sustain. The disjunction is especially noticeable in Nidaa Tounes and the General Union of Tunisian Workers (UGTT), which played a key role in brokering the country's new constitution.

For Nidaa Tounes, the split is over cooperating with the Islamists. Internal dissent is especially prominent within a leftist faction that sees any rapprochement with Ennahdha as a poisoned chalice. In fact, the party is an incoherent grouping of liberals, leftists, and old regime officials, held together by its charismatic founder, Essebsi.<sup>24</sup>

Nidaa also faces potentially damaging splits over who will succeed Essebsi, who stepped down as party chair after his election to the presidency. A factional struggle to control the party's chairmanship and executive office has escalated since then. In March 2015, 46 disgruntled Nidaa members of parliament, 60 members of the party's executive committee, and 24 regional coordinators declared a boycott of the high-ranking founder's committee. Their

revolt was caused in part by a proposal to include Essebsi's son, Hafedh, and three others in the founder's committee. The fierce contest over leadership positions in Nidaa is expected to intensify ahead of a party convention slated for fall 2015.<sup>25</sup>

Ultimately, Nidaa Tounes could fragment, consolidate itself into a democratic, secular party, or try to reconstruct a neo-authoritarian state. Its uncertain fate is compounded by questions about who will hold the party together after Essebsi departs the political scene. The last time an octogenarian was removed from Tunisian politics was when then prime minister Ben Ali ousted the eighty-four-year-old Bourguiba in 1987. That history gives pause to those Tunisians who are concerned about Essebsi's health and the rivals fighting to succeed him. Another worrisome example that has drawn notice in Tunisia is the aging Algerian president, Abdelaziz Bouteflika, who was reelected to a fourth five-year term in April 2014 despite serious illness and doubts about his ability to govern.

Internal divisions are also manifest within the UGTT, whose rank and file are growing disenchanted with the direction of their leadership, which is increasingly seen as subservient to business interests at the expense of employees' rights.<sup>26</sup>

## Divisions Within Ennahdha

The Islamists are suffering from their own divisions. Today, there are two competing currents within Ennahdha, as the resurgence of forces from the old regime threatens to drive a wedge between the party's pragmatic leadership and its base.

The first believes that integration into the political system through a coalition with Nidaa in government or in parliament is the smartest strategy for securing democratic gains and shielding Islamists from the repressive fate that befell them from 1990 to 2011. This approach is defended by the party's leader, Rached Ghannouchi, and most of its central leadership, who see no other choice but to show restraint and come to terms with elements of the old regime that are represented in the ranks of Nidaa Tounes.<sup>27</sup>

The second current, advocated by the regional and local branches of the party, fears that Ghannouchi's strategic calculus is too dependent on the goodwill of Essebsi, who is reported to have promised Ennahdha protection from judicial harassment and police repression.<sup>28</sup> The hard-liners in this camp fear that Ennahdha's leaders will be co-opted into the system and lose their principles, credibility, and rank-and-file support, and they denounce Ghannouchi's preservationist strategy as elitist and authoritarian.<sup>29</sup>

Under the leadership of Ghannouchi, a strong voice against religious radicalism and political exclusion, Ennahdha has matured into a disciplined party capable of holding moderate centrist positions and providing responsible

leadership. Ghannouchi and others who favor compromise believe that the future of political Islam lies with political normalization, moderate conservatism, and consensus building. But Ghannouchi will only maintain his authority within Ennahdha as long as his strategy of compromise, gradualism, and inclusiveness leads to political roles for Islamists.

The rank and file's fears of an authoritarian *revanche* are based on the increasing politicization of terrorism, media sensationalism about Islamism, and the public's growing anxiety about insecurity.

When, after the first round of the presidential election, Essebsi denounced the 1.1 million Tunisians who had voted for his secular rival, Marzouki, as extremists and terrorist sympathizers, it only confirmed Islamists' worst fears. These were, after all, the same insidious old markers employed by Ben Ali and Bourguiba. Such caricatures combine nefariously to produce a reading of society in which the good liberal and secular Tunisians face off against the bad Islamists.

Unease within the party over Ennahdha's multiple concessions on ideology and politics have been mounting since the tumultuous summer of 2013, when the political assassination of Tunisian opposition leader Mohamed Brahmi and a military coup in Egypt that ousted the Muslim Brotherhood's Mohamed Morsi from power put Islamists under pressure. An appreciable number in the rank and file reproach the leadership for being too conciliatory toward Ennahdha's hostile opponents and for missing several opportunities while in power to purge the administration and media of the vestiges of the old regime. In the view of these members, Ennahdha's reluctance to "immunize the revolution" by excluding political figures associated with Ben Ali from holding office and dismantling the clientelistic networks that propped up the old dictatorial order allowed Nidaa Tounes to cultivate them for electoral support. More than half of Nidaa's parliamentarians were actively involved with Ben Ali's disgraced Constitutional Democratic Rally party, which was dissolved after the revolution.

The skeptics within the Islamist party fear that any alliance with Nidaa would relegate Ennahdha to an auxiliary role. This is essentially what happened when a coalition cabinet was formed in February 2015 and Ennahdha was given just one of 28 ministerial posts and three of fourteen secretary of state posts.<sup>30</sup>

With Essebsi as president, the main levers of power are in the hands of Nidaa Tounes, which will decide nominations to the Constitutional Court and control the Ministry of the Interior.<sup>31</sup>

Under the reign of Ben Ali, the ministry was transformed into an all-powerful institution and a pillar of the regime, and it remains an opaque and omnipresent body. It was fitting that the thousands of protesters who revolted in 2011 converged at the ministry's headquarters, a formidable symbol of the repression and excesses that were the core of the old regime.<sup>32</sup>

After the revolution, the basic orientation and authoritarian norms of the ministry did not change significantly. Its widespread powers and old habits were quickly reactivated with the emergence of violent extremist groups.

Human rights groups warn against a return to the use of intimidating and humiliating practices. In poor urban areas and city outskirts, young people denounce routine police bullying.<sup>33</sup>

The rank and file within Ennahdha would prefer that the party become a constructive opposition party, promoting cooperative governance and cross-party collaboration when possible, and acting as a check on any transgressions of the constitution or antidemocratic tendencies within Nidaa Tounes. Supporters of this strategy point to the effective coordination between the two parties in electing the speaker of parliament (from Nidaa Tounes) and his deputies (from Ennahdha and other parties) in early December 2014. Being in the opposition would also allow Ennahdha to solidify its ranks, prepare for the next electoral contests, and escape the trap of being associated with the painful and unpopular economic reforms that the new government must enact.<sup>34</sup>

Ghannouchi and his camp lobbied hard for participation in the government. Ghannouchi's mind-set of political compromise is not new; he has always advocated rapprochement with those who hold power.<sup>35</sup> Between 1987 and 1989, for example, he engineered a short-lived agreement with the Ben Ali regime that allowed Islamists to contest elections. This "historic compromise," as it was billed at the time, faltered as soon as the Islamists' electoral score seemed threatening to the hegemonic interests of the dictatorship.<sup>36</sup>

In 2002, Ghannouchi again tried testing the waters by praising Morocco's experiment in integrating its Islamists within the strict confines of monarchical rules and regulations. Ghannouchi's message to the Tunisian regime was that it, too, could live with a cohabitation model in which Ben Ali, as self-declared "president for life," agreed to share some power with a democratically elected parliament. In 2007, during Ennahdha's political convention in London, Ghannouchi reiterated his call for national reconciliation and dialogue. When Ennahdha ascended to power in November 2011, the party slowed down the transitional justice process that was established to address past wrongdoings and opposed the political exclusion of members of the old regime.<sup>37</sup>

Ennahdha's leadership has recognized such accommodation as a necessary condition for political stability, and, especially after the 2013 coup in Egypt, it has downgraded controversial Islamist prescriptions and restrained ideologues who have difficulty tolerating different worldviews or doctrines. This effort to reassure was seen in the movement's strategy in the 2014 parliamentary election. In selecting its candidates, Ennahdha sidelined its most ineffective and hard-line outgoing elected officials; only 33 of 89 sitting deputies sought reelection. The same strategy was applied to the Majlis Choura, the party's consultative body, whose most incendiary members were edged out.

Ennahdha's leadership is well aware that Islamist movements whose decisions and policies are still shaped by ideological rigidity and outdated conservatism are doomed to fail. In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood's inability to downplay the influence of its domineering conservative factions during Morsi's presidency dragged the movement into damaging battles over identity and

individual freedoms.<sup>38</sup> The temptations of power rendered the Brothers oblivious to the simple fact that political Islam's survival is contingent on Islamists' ability to deliver on promises of social justice and economic development.

Instead, Ennahdha is trying to emulate Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP), which continues its electoral winning streak despite secularists' mistrust of Islamists' presumed authoritarian tendencies and hidden agendas.

Turkey's Islamists were on the ropes when the army intervened in 1994 to overthrow the Islamist prime minister, Necmettin Erbakan, and curb Islamist encroachment into secular state institutions. Their strong return to full power in 2002 occurred only after a laborious and often contentious effort to downgrade ideology and inject a heavy dose of pragmatic realism into Islamists' agendas, tactical choices, and operational strategies.<sup>39</sup> As the *Economist* aptly put it in 2008, "Autocratic regimes in the Muslim world often ban religious parties, which then go underground and turn violent. Turkey's Islamists have taken a different path. Despite being repeatedly outlawed and ejected from power, pious politicians have shunned violence, embraced democracy, and moved into the mainstream."<sup>40</sup>

As Ennahdha plots its course, the sharp lesson is that the majority of voters care more about economics and development than about society moving closer to a utopian Islamist social order.<sup>41</sup> Just as Turkey's AKP successfully portrayed itself as a business-friendly party committed to good governance and economic development, Ennahdha is working hard to broaden its constituency by heralding democracy and building a conservative base of middle-class and bourgeois entrepreneurs. The conservative heartland of southern Tunisia is a testing ground for this strategy. Ennahdha hopes to incorporate members of the Sfaxian middle class and bourgeoisie, who are more interested in making money than implementing Islamic law, as a counterweight to the anti-Islamist Bourguibian business class that is associated with Nidaa Tounes.<sup>42</sup>

Other Islamists who are participating in transitional politics are undergoing similar ideological and political adjustments. In Morocco, for example, the difficulties of governance and the complex patterns of Islamist normalization with the palace and secular forces have seriously impacted the political behavior and ideological tendencies of the Party of Justice and Development (PJD).<sup>43</sup> The best illustration of this trend is the surprise election in August 2014 of Abderrahim Chikhi to lead the party's ideological wing. After three rounds of voting, Chikhi, a financial engineer and counsellor to Prime Minister Abdelilah Benkirane, defeated several of the movement's best-known ideologues, including Ahmed Raïssouni, who is credited with developing the intellectual and theological underpinnings that distinguish Moroccan Islamism from Salafi teachings and the political thought of the Egyptian Brotherhood. The democratic proceedings and the election of a more conciliatory leadership, including a woman as vice president of the movement, is another strong sign of Islamists' efforts to control their conservative factions and distance themselves from ideological battles.<sup>44</sup>

In their effort to redefine themselves, Islamists in Tunisia and Morocco will continue to be challenged from within their own ranks by fervent ideologues on both sides of the secular-Islamist fault line.

## Shifting Frontiers of Islamism

Outside Ennahdha, there are also significant disagreements about the proper role of Islamism in Tunisia, some laced with high levels of social mistrust.

Many secularists, for example, are dubious of Ennahdha's ideological evolution; several derisively dismiss the party as a chameleon. In their view, Islamists' broader ambition is to Islamize Tunisian society and politics, a totalitarian temptation that critics say is ingrained in Islamists' DNA, regardless of their discourse and current practices. There is some merit to calls for vigilance about Islamism's contemporary manifestations.

But there are also ample grounds for optimism about the reformist trajectory that Ennahdha has taken. The party's flexibility and pragmatism offer some reason for confidence about future possibilities, and its actions while in

government demonstrate a commitment to democratic politics and constitutional pluralism. Since the revolution, for example, Ennahdha has kept its word that it would not govern alone, impose sharia law, or seek the presidency in the 2014 election.<sup>45</sup>

While Ennahdha's detractors acknowledge its pragmatism and flexibility, they assert that these traits are driven by necessity and easily reversible.<sup>46</sup> The party's pragmatic impulse is bound to die away if power shifts back to the Islamists, these critics argue, to be replaced by attempts to

dominate the system, marginalize Ennahdha's opponents, and impose restrictions on individual rights and liberties.

But any hard look at reality will show that while pragmatism is usually informed by necessity and constraints, it still doesn't emerge in an ideological vacuum. Ennahdha's kind of realism is the product of decades of internal ideological debate on how best to reconcile Islamic values with the way the modern world operates.<sup>47</sup> These conversations were driven by local political constraints as well as regional and international pressures. It is difficult to conceive of Ennahdha's endorsement of the liberal and democratic values enshrined in Tunisia's new constitution without the long and contentious process of ideological revision and critical reappraisal of religious precepts that have motivated Tunisian Islamism. This ideological evolution continues to affect the movement's political decisions.<sup>48</sup>

Ennahdha's articulation of reformist Islamism also elicits criticism from other quarters of Tunisian society, where some see the party as drifting from its Islamist roots to become a dull and ordinary political entity. More conservative

---

**In their effort to redefine themselves, Islamists in Tunisia and Morocco will continue to be challenged from within their own ranks by fervent ideologues on both sides of the secular-Islamist fault line.**

---

Salafists denounce the party's embrace of democracy and its conceptions of an Islamic state as anathema to pure Islamism. And Ghannouchi's progressive interpretation of Islamic law as consistent with the values of liberty, freedom, and citizenship is seen as a travesty by many in the Salafist camp.

It is not only Salafists who deny Ennahdha the Islamist label. Some secularists who consider Ennahdha's moderation and pragmatism as genuine assert that such an evolution is testament to the failure of political Islam. It is, they argue, Ennahdha's divorce from its ideological principles that allowed it to survive in a pluralistic environment.<sup>49</sup> This view aligns with scholarly discourses that argue that the shifting dynamics within some Islamist movements denote the dawn of a post-Islamist age. The self-limiting ideology of these movements, and their inability to offer any Islamic solutions to the problems of governance, are what compelled pragmatic Islamist actors to embrace democracy and individual rights. In other words, Islamists have no other choice but to transcend political Islam and adopt a new language and politics that is informed by rights, plurality, and a civil state.<sup>50</sup> In this view, by becoming ideologically indistinct from other conservative center-right parties, the new Islamists have become Islamists in name only.

This post-Islamist thesis aptly describes Islamism's self-limitations and the dynamics that facilitated its movement from rigid thinking to a new openness and flexibility. But this shift does not signal the demise of Islamism as a coherent political and social project. As Ghannouchi explains, the rethinking of Islamist politics is a continuation of a long tradition of Islamic renewal and reform in the Maghreb.<sup>51</sup> In this regard, Ennahdha's innovations are consistent with the essence of Islamic teachings, namely justice and liberty.<sup>52</sup>

Ultimately, Ennahdha's trajectory of reform and political learning will be influenced by both endogenous and exogenous factors. If its constructive engagement falters internally or is thwarted by opponents, the most radical Islamists and jihadists would reap the most benefit. Radical Salafists have already exacerbated society's differences and conflicts. The threat of such extreme forces poses a major challenge to Tunisia's democratic transition.

## Insecurity and Terrorism

After the overthrow of Ben Ali in January 2011, the transitional government's difficulties in quickly restoring law and order and improving economic conditions provided more extreme Salafists with room to expand. The tortuous trajectory of democratization contributed to the radicalization of some Tunisians who were disaffected with the political process and its failure to respond to their concerns and grievances.

While most Salafists are nonviolent, a radical minority engaged in violence and intimidation in Tunisia's poorer suburbs, posing a major security challenge to the government.<sup>53</sup> Aggressive Salafists and vigilante groups conducted

patrols in public spaces, enforcing religious dress codes, destroying Sufi mausoleums, smashing up bars, and terrorizing anyone who dared to challenge or test the boundaries of morality. These newly self-appointed guardians of decency also occupied themselves by dispensing simple and quick justice, distributing alms, and providing jobs.<sup>54</sup>

Up until mid-2013, Ennahdha permitted the legalization of radical but peaceful Islamist organizations like Hizb ut-Tahrir, and held out hope that Salafists would buy into the party's evolutionary model of change and adapt their ideology to the constraints of the political transition. Ennahdha's leaders reasoned that through engagement and dialogue, Salafists would see the virtue of gradualism and pragmatism in pursuing their ideological objectives, and appreciate the freedom that democracy allows to preach and engage in unhindered, but nonviolent, religious activism.<sup>55</sup>

The refusal of most Salafists to heed Ennahdha's pleas to engage in politics and forgo confrontation reached a critical point in 2013, when radical militants started targeting Tunisian troops and security officials. Ennahdha toughened its approach to radical Salafists in March of that year, after concluding that they were becoming a liability. And, after a transitional interlude of confusion and instability, the police and intelligence services reestablished their presence in the many areas that had seen a rush of violence. By the time Mehdi Jomaa took over as prime minister in January 2014, Salafists in poor neighborhoods were in retreat. A year later, the frequent intimidations and threatening parades of young men dressed in traditional robes with long beards had ceased.<sup>56</sup>

Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia (AST)—a jihadi group accused of attacking the U.S. embassy in Tunis in September 2012 and designated by the Tunisian government as a terrorist group in August 2013—has been hounded by the Tunisian security services; nearly 2,000 of the movement's militants and supporters are in prison. The group was founded in 2011 by Seifallah Ben Hassine, also known as Abu Iyad al-Tunisi, a Tunisian jihadist who wanted to create a counterweight to Ennahdha's mellow Islamism.<sup>57</sup> Young Islamists impatient with Ennahdha's ideological concessions and gradualism joined AST and followed firebrand Salafi preachers who denounced the party's cohabitation with secular parties and its exclusion of sharia from the constitution.

AST did not start off as a terrorist organization. Instead, it concentrated on growing its ranks through aggressive Salafist propaganda and community activism. And it initially pursued a dual-track strategy of building a formidable grassroots organization that eschewed armed violence within Tunisia, while wholeheartedly supporting joining Muslims in other theaters who were fighting for survival. This distinction between peace in Tunisia and war abroad gradually blurred as AST grew more confrontational toward the Ennahdha-led government.

The state's tough countermeasures escalated into a cycle of repression and retaliation. After the government prevented AST from holding its third annual gathering in 2013, the group hardened its rhetoric against the state and Ennahdha. This process of radicalization coincided with the rise of terrorism

in Tunisia's border regions. A jihadist group that called itself the Militia of Uqba ibn Nafaa in Tunisia appeared in the Mount Chaambi area near the Algerian border, killing several Tunisian soldiers in the summer of 2013.<sup>58</sup> The Ennahdha-led government accused AST of supporting this armed jihadist cell and held it responsible for both the attacks at Mount Chaambi and the killing of Brahmi and another secular politician, Chokri Belaid.

The spiral of crackdown and retaliation escalated after the killing of fifteen Tunisian soldiers on Mount Chaambi on July 16, 2014. A few days after that attack, the authorities banned local organizations suspected of sympathizing with radical Salafists. Mosques, websites, and radio and television stations accused of abetting extremism were closed. Hundreds of young people suspected of associating with radical groups were rounded up. These measures raised the concern of human rights organizations, which feared a return of the old repressive order.<sup>59</sup>

AST has been greatly weakened and adrift since the state began its crackdown on the movement, shunned by the political mainstream, unsure how to achieve its goals, and unable to control its base or galvanize sympathy for its ideology. But many of its fragments are still hanging on. The perils of such fragmentation and disorganization can be seen in the violent and unpredictable terror attacks carried out by individuals or small groups no longer affiliated with AST. Some of these groups also engage in criminal activities.

For now, the remnants of the movement have split into several groups. One conciliatory strain stresses peaceful social activism. There are also two major jihadi currents, one tempted by the Islamic State's shock and awe tactics, and the other sympathetic to, and sometimes linked to, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb.<sup>60</sup>

The latter, the larger of the two, frames its resort to violence within a narrative of defensive jihad against perceived state oppression and Western domination. The calculation behind that tactic is that targeted violence against government bullies will elicit harsh and indiscriminate countermeasures, which in turn will strengthen the militants' cause within their aggrieved social base—or, at the very least, contribute to the toleration of their activities.

The theological and political rationalization of limited violence against the security services distinguishes this movement from Islamic State sympathizers, who revel in the barbaric exploits perpetrated by men in the battlefields of Syria and Iraq who follow Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the Sunni extremist group's self-proclaimed caliph. The Islamic State is unconcerned with the theological underpinnings of other Islamist worldviews. Its ideology of war imposes violence over theology, as does its outreach campaign, which stresses victory over orthodoxy. The Islamic State markets itself as the vanguard of Islamic resurgence, showcasing its rapid and decisive operations as proof of its ability to make history and deliver salvation to disaffected Muslims.

Some members of AST have been lured by Baghdadi's call to battle. This current is still in the minority within AST, but the Islamic State's recruitment

bonanza among Tunisians (the Ministry of the Interior estimates that there are 3,000 Tunisian fighters in Syria and Iraq, the largest cohort of foreign fighters) points to the possibility that more disaffected youth from poor urban zones and marginalized border areas might join the fight.

In the end, success always begets success. As long as radical Islamists are seen as warriors of indomitable spirit, their battlefield endurance and agility will continue to inspire a number of Tunisians to follow the trajectory of their countrymen who joined Islamist militias in Syria, Iraq, and Libya. The state's

---

**The challenge now is how to conduct counterterror operations without alienating aggrieved communities and undermining the country's hard-won rights.**

---

policy of eradicating AST risks expediting the alliance between what is left of the movement and the Islamic State. The most repressive policing practices tend to radicalize dissent and push some members into individual violence.

Yet defenders of repressive counterterror efforts believe that tough countermeasures are necessary to thwart attacks and subdue violent extremist groups. Public support for the restoration of stability and security provides a boost for

this approach, which stresses the necessity of a trade-off between security and civil liberties.<sup>61</sup> An appreciable number of Tunisians believe that a conciliatory stance will not help dissuade radical Salafists from using violence or intimidation to propagate their views. After all, Ennahdha's soft approach of inclusion and accommodation toward radical Salafists did not lead to any tempering of their militant zeal.

The challenge now is how to conduct counterterror operations without alienating aggrieved communities and undermining the country's hard-won rights.<sup>62</sup> In Tunisia, alienation, economics, and politics are three predictors of radicalization.

## Jihadism and Organized Crime

The nature and difficulty of countering violent extremism is compounded by the great menace of organized crime in Tunisia. In the neglected areas of the east and south, drug trafficking, small arms, and violent extremism are starting to intermingle in unpredictable ways. As the struggle for control of this informal trade and contraband intensifies in the border regions, the development of loose alliances among jihadists, drug traffickers, and opportunistic tribal youths is becoming a reality.<sup>63</sup>

Armed jihadists don't control the lucrative criminal economy, but they exert influence over it with the protection and permission they are able to grant smugglers ferrying loads of drugs and other high-value contraband. This partnership is particularly strong in the border regions, where militants control important routes. Smuggling networks have little choice but to cooperate with the militants who control parts of the forested and mountainous western border with Algeria. In return for safe passage, the smugglers must pay a tax and provide food supplies to the militants. Some attacks on army personnel that

have occurred in this area since 2012 have not been conducted for jihadi purposes, but rather to distract security forces and divert resources from cross-border smuggling routes.<sup>64</sup>

As in other countries where drugs and jihadism are companions, militants and traffickers in Tunisia sometimes hail from the same tribal clans. Such alliances run the risk of becoming professionalized and more enduring. The drug trade offers the lure of easy money to low-paid security officials and the legions of unemployed and frustrated youth in border regions and impoverished urban areas. “Although there may only be about 100 armed militants entrenched in the mountainous, forested areas of the west,” warns a 2014 report by the International Crisis Group, “the number of people involved in the lucrative illegal trade networks and associated violence runs into the tens of thousands along the borders and in the suburbs of the major cities.”<sup>65</sup>

Along the porous southeastern border, the collapse of order in Libya has made the security and social situation even more fraught. The successive changes in the balance of power among Libyan tribal militias have upset the established order of the traditional cartels that controlled trafficking routes and border posts on the Libyan side. This has destabilized the contraband market and allowed for the creation of new opportunistic groups unknown to security officials and more willing to trade in drugs and firearms and collaborate with any armed group for profit.

The flow of migrants, arms, and drugs into Tunisia has so far been limited, and the region has not turned into a major supply line for the warring factions on the Libyan side of the border. But that could change if Libya descends into complete chaos or if the Islamic State fragments or weakens, driving a massive return of Tunisian jihadists into the ranks of smugglers and jihadi groups operating in Tunisia’s border regions. The government’s ability to prevent such a scenario is quite limited because the situation is largely dependent on the outcome of conflicts outside Tunisia’s borders.

---

**Tunisia’s economic problems feed the security challenges and extremism the country faces.**

---

## Economic Strains

Tunisia’s economic problems feed the security challenges and extremism the country faces.

The economy remains fragile, with real growth stalling at an estimated 2.8 percent in 2014. External imbalances, rising inflation (6.5–7 percent), and a 9.2 percent deficit in public finances are major sources of stress for a government under pressure to put its fiscal house in order, tackle high unemployment (15 percent), and make investments in the marginalized areas of the country’s interior and border regions.<sup>66</sup>

The size of the informal economy, which has grown exponentially to reach 50 percent of gross domestic product, also drags on economic growth.<sup>67</sup> Contraband

merchandise from Algeria and Libya is traded not just in the border regions but throughout the country. Competition from informal vendors has led several local firms to go out of business.

The severe economic crisis the country has experienced in the four years after the revolution has contributed to this rising trend of informality. But there are also structural determinants of the black economy, chiefly bureaucratic corruption, excessive regulation, high taxes, and exorbitant start-up costs. The off-the-books business will continue to thrive as long as the state is unable to provide alternatives in the formal economy and tackle corruption.<sup>68</sup>

The plunge in world oil prices that started in late 2014 could facilitate the new government's mission of reducing wasteful subsidies and other economic distortions. Lower oil prices will also help reduce the country's budget deficit and moderate inflation. Experience, however, suggests that it would be too optimistic to expect the new elected leadership to enact the needed structural reforms, which would necessarily affect the interests of constituencies and powerful interest groups that backed the winners of the 2014 elections.

The disparity between Tunisia's coastal areas and its precariously marginalized periphery is a source of destabilization and a threat to democratic consolidation.<sup>69</sup> The last four years have not improved the economic experience of these regions. Outside the wave of state hiring in the early days after the revolution and timid efforts to lure investors to the region, the economic plight of this half of Tunisia remains unchanged.

Part of the difficulty of bridging the divide between Tunisia's two halves is structural. In an economy that is dependent on external trade, regions that lack infrastructure have difficulty attracting investors. Export-oriented industries require proximity to ports and efficient transportation infrastructure, assets that Tunisia's interior lacks. To invest in these long-marginalized regions, the state needs to alleviate its debt and increase its resources. This requires reform of an unfair tax system.<sup>70</sup> In addition, the new executive and legislative branches must end hiring prejudices and the discriminatory treatment of businesses based in the south, and put decentralization policies and capacities in place to empower municipalities to plan, implement, and deliver services in accordance with principles of transparency and accountability.

## Conclusion

In Tunisia's historic 2014 presidential election, Essebsi artfully played off Tunisians' growing anxiety and their palpable nostalgia for the familiar contours of a simpler, safer era. Compared to the scary and confusing present circumstance, the prerevolutionary era, however unpleasant, was much more predictable and stable, and Essebsi incessantly trumpeted the good old days while banishing the bad memories of dictatorship. In the end, considerable disgruntlement with the Ennahdha government drove a plurality of Tunisians to call the old guard back to power.

This is not a peculiarity of the Tunisian revolutionary process. In fact, it is largely the pattern of most democratic transitions: the first free and fair elections are dominated by the enemies of the old regime, while the second tend to bring back figures from the past (at least those who are not completely discredited) because they seem reassuring after the turbulence of the early transition years.

After its convincing electoral wins, Nidaa Tounes should be as magnanimous in victory as its opponents were gracious in defeat. The first priority for the new rulers of Tunisia is to find equilibrium between multiple opposing forces and aspirations.

On the economic and social fronts, there is an urgent need to reform the fiscal and tax system, bolster the social protection system, and reduce regional imbalances. The concentration of public investment projects in coastal areas has contributed to high unemployment and poverty rates in other regions. A reassessment of regional development policies and a fair allocation of resources to the marginalized areas of Tunisia's interior and south would help reduce the country's glaring social and regional inequities and strengthen the state's presence in the hinterland.

Tunisia's leadership must also navigate the security versus liberty predicament facing the country. The March 2015 assault on the National Bardo Museum is a painful blow to a country that relies heavily on tourism. It is also a major test of Tunisian authorities' commitment to the rule of law and freedom of speech.

Efforts to curb violent extremism and control cross-border contraband must be accompanied by the professionalization of the security services. A still-unreformed security sector is an impediment to democracy, security, and sustainable development. The United States and its allies should keep a careful eye on Tunisia's fight against terrorism, to ensure that the country's leaders do not sacrifice civil liberties as they pursue security.

The international community also has an important role to play in keeping Tunisia on the trajectory of democratic consolidation and economic reform. The United States and its democratic partners should encourage Tunisia to improve its governance practices and make much-needed economic reforms by providing a package of loans and grants to the country.

The unrelenting ideological and political polarization tearing the region apart has dangerous echoes in Tunisia. The country does not exist in a cocoon, and its contending political groups have affinities and contacts with the different warring factions in the new Arab cold war. Nidaa Tounes, for example, is close to Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Egypt, which are determined to crush their ideological rival, the Muslim Brotherhood, and undermine populist movements that advocate democracy. It would be a tragedy if these forces started using Tunisia as yet another battlefield in their effort to crush Islamists.

---

**Efforts to curb violent extremism and control cross-border contraband must be accompanied by the professionalization of the security services.**

---



## Notes

- 1 Edward P. Djerejian, "The U.S. and the Middle East in a Changing World," *DISAM Journal* (Summer 1992): 32–38, [www.disam.dscamill/pubs/Vol%2014\\_4/Djerejian.pdf](http://www.disam.dscamill/pubs/Vol%2014_4/Djerejian.pdf).
- 2 Among the particularly worrying signs were the early 2015 arrests of some bloggers, comedians, and other critics of state institutions like the military and the president. See "Tunisia Arrests Comedian, TV Host for 'Offending' President," Agence France-Presse, March 13, 2015, <http://news.yahoo.com/tunisia-arrests-comedian-tv-host-offending-president-155125851.html>.
- 3 Eric Reidy, "Tunisian Youth Skip Presidential Vote," *Al-Monitor*, November 25, 2014, [www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/11/tunisia-presidential-elections-low-youth-turnout.html#](http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/11/tunisia-presidential-elections-low-youth-turnout.html#).
- 4 An October 2014 Pew Research Center survey showed growing disenchantment with politics. It found that 65 percent of Tunisians believe that "political leaders are only interested in power and personal gain." It is revealing that turnout in Sidi Bouzid, the cradle of the Tunisian revolution, was among the lowest in the country. Low levels of electoral participation were also registered in the border regions that subsist off the contraband economy and smuggling. See "Tunisian Confidence in Democracy Wanes," Pew Research Center, October 15, 2014, [www.pewglobal.org/2014/10/15/tunisian-confidence-in-democracy-wanes](http://www.pewglobal.org/2014/10/15/tunisian-confidence-in-democracy-wanes).
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 Essebsi served as ambassador and parliamentary speaker under Tunisia's former dictator, Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, and in powerful ministerial roles under his strongman predecessor Habib Bourguiba, including as minister of interior in the 1960s, when he cracked down on dissent. After the revolution, he served honorably as an interim prime minister and successfully steered Tunisia through the treacherous waters of transition and into democratic elections that were held in October 2011 and won by Ennahdha.
- 7 Jerome Heurtaux, "Tunisie, fausse victoire du camp laïc," *Liberation*, November 4, 2014, [www.liberation.fr/monde/2014/11/04/tunisie-fausse-victoire-du-camp-laic\\_1136133](http://www.liberation.fr/monde/2014/11/04/tunisie-fausse-victoire-du-camp-laic_1136133).
- 8 Christina Omlin, "Ennahda Has an Unbelievable Capacity to Adjust," *Qantara.de*, January 20, 2014, <http://en.qantara.de/content/interview-with-hele-beji-ennahda-has-an-unbelievable-capacity-to-adjust>.
- 9 Charlotte Bozonnet, "M. Essebsi: 'Nous sommes des concurrents, pas des ennemis d'Ennahda,'" *Le Monde*, October 30, 2014, [www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2014/10/30/m-essebsi-nous-sommes-des-concurrents-pas-des-ennemis-d-ennahda\\_4515066\\_3210.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2014/10/30/m-essebsi-nous-sommes-des-concurrents-pas-des-ennemis-d-ennahda_4515066_3210.html).
- 10 See Vincent Geisser, "La démocratie tunisienne confrontée à ses démons populistes," *Zaman France*, October 27, 2014, [www.zamanfrance.fr/article/democratie-tunisienne-confrontee-a-demons-populistes-12958.html](http://www.zamanfrance.fr/article/democratie-tunisienne-confrontee-a-demons-populistes-12958.html).

- 11 See Anne Wolf, "Power Shift in Tunisia: Electoral Success of Political Parties Might Deepen Polarization," SWP Comments, December 2014, [www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/comments/2014C54\\_wolf.pdf](http://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/comments/2014C54_wolf.pdf).
- 12 The Free Patriotic Union (UPL) came third with sixteen seats, followed by the leftist Popular Front coalition with fifteen and the liberal Afek Tounes with eight seats.
- 13 See Geisser, "La démocratie tunisienne confrontée à ses démons populistes."
- 14 Charlotte Bozonnet, "Slim Riahi, le Berlusconi tunisien," *Le Monde*, November 22, 2014, [www.lemonde.fr/tunisie/article/2014/11/22/slim-riahi-le-berlusconi-tunisien\\_4527785\\_1466522.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/tunisie/article/2014/11/22/slim-riahi-le-berlusconi-tunisien_4527785_1466522.html).
- 15 In the presidential election however, Riahi faltered. It was easier to win elections at the local level than to compete on the national stage, where successful candidates need to exude statesman-like qualities.
- 16 Geisser, "La démocratie tunisienne confrontée à ses démons populistes."
- 17 See International Crisis Group, "Old Wounds, New Fears," Middle East and North Africa Briefing no. 44, December 19, 2014, [www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/tunisia/b044-tunisia-s-elections-old-wounds-new-fears.aspx](http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/tunisia/b044-tunisia-s-elections-old-wounds-new-fears.aspx).
- 18 Fabio Merone, "The New Islamic Middle Class and the Struggle for Hegemony in Tunisia," *Afriche e Orienti*, forthcoming.
- 19 See International Crisis Group, "Old Wounds, New Fears."
- 20 Brésillon, "La Tunisie reste terre d'espoir: la révolution aux urnes."
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 International Crisis Group, "Old Wounds, New Fears."
- 24 See Anouar Jamaoui, "The Impact of the Coalition on Ennahda and Nidaa Tounes," Open Democracy, March 11, 2015, [www.opendemocracy.net/arab-awakening/anouar-jamaoui/impact-of-coalition-on-ennahda-and-nidaa-tounes](http://www.opendemocracy.net/arab-awakening/anouar-jamaoui/impact-of-coalition-on-ennahda-and-nidaa-tounes).
- 25 See Walid al-Talili, "Revolt Brewing Within Ranks of Tunisia's Ruling Party," *Al-Araby*, March 10, 2015, [www.alaraby.co.uk/english/politics/2015/3/11/revolt-brewing-within-ranks-of-tunisia-s-ruling-party#sthash.j6e3YbD6.dpuf](http://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/politics/2015/3/11/revolt-brewing-within-ranks-of-tunisia-s-ruling-party#sthash.j6e3YbD6.dpuf).
- 26 International Crisis Group, "L'exception tunisienne: succès et limites du consensus," June 5, 2014.
- 27 Rached Ghannouchi, "Why Did Ennahda Accept an Unequal Partnership," Middle East Monitor, March 6, 2015, [www.middleeastmonitor.com/articles/africa/17355-why-did-ennahda-accept-an-unequal-partnership](http://www.middleeastmonitor.com/articles/africa/17355-why-did-ennahda-accept-an-unequal-partnership).
- 28 See International Crisis Group, "Old Wounds, New Fears," 8.
- 29 See "Analyse du compromis Nidaa/Nahda: le 'syndrome de Stockholm' n'est-il pas en train de devenir le 'syndrome de Tunis?'" *Zaman France*, December 6, 2014, [www.zamanfrance.fr/article/analyse-compromis-nidaanahda-syndrome-stockholm-nest-il-pas-en-train-devenir-syndrome-tunis](http://www.zamanfrance.fr/article/analyse-compromis-nidaanahda-syndrome-stockholm-nest-il-pas-en-train-devenir-syndrome-tunis).
- 30 See Monica Marks, "Tunisia Opts for an Inclusive New Government," *Washington Post*, February 3, 2015, [www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2015/02/03/tunisia-opts-for-an-inclusive-new-government](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2015/02/03/tunisia-opts-for-an-inclusive-new-government).
- 31 Though the constitutional powers of the office of the presidency have been reduced, presidents are still relevant and can be influential in shaping the trajectory of the democratic transition. The president enjoys widespread prerogatives in the areas of foreign policy and defense. The legitimation of popular election also gives the president a semblance of authority. Much is going to depend on the president's view of his constitutional responsibility and his approach to constitutional interpretation. Although the new constitution marks a notable departure from the incongruities and contradictions of the previous authoritarian constitution, it nonetheless leaves a zone of ambiguity that can be used to expand the president's powers.
- 32 Brésillon, "La Tunisie reste terre d'espoir: la révolution aux urnes."

- 33 Olfa Lamoulou, “Les jeunes des quartiers populaires face à la police en Tunisie,” *ORIENT XXI*, March 20, 2015, <http://orientxxi.info/lu-vu-entendu/les-jeunes-des-quartiers,0845>.
- 34 International Crisis Group, “Old Wounds, New Fears.”
- 35 “Analyse du compromis Nidaa/Nahda: le ‘syndrome de Stockholm’ n’est-il pas en train de devenir le ‘syndrome de Tunis?’”
- 36 Ibid.
- 37 Ibid.
- 38 See Khalil al-Anani, “Whither Political Islam?” Al Jazeera Online, December 24, 2013, [www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2013/12/whither-political-islam-2013122310825761430.html](http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2013/12/whither-political-islam-2013122310825761430.html).
- 39 Ibid.
- 40 “Turkey’s Secular Constitution: See You in Court,” *Economist*, March 19, 2008, [www.economist.com/node/10881280](http://www.economist.com/node/10881280).
- 41 See Tarek Masoud, *Counting Islam Religion, Class, and Elections in Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).
- 42 For more analysis of Ennahdha’s counterhegemonic strategy, see Merone, “The New Islamic Middle Class and the Struggle for Hegemony in Tunisia.”
- 43 See Anouar Boukhars, “Morocco’s Islamists: Bucking the Trend,” FRIDE, June 2014, [http://fride.org/download/PB\\_182\\_Morocco\\_Islamists.pdf](http://fride.org/download/PB_182_Morocco_Islamists.pdf).
- 44 See Mohammed Masbah, “Islamist and Secular Forces in Morocco: Not a Zero-Sum Game,” SWP, November 2014, [www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/comments/2014C51\\_msb.pdf](http://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/comments/2014C51_msb.pdf).
- 45 Nadia Marzouki, “The Politics of Religious Freedom: Nahda’s Return to History,” *The Immanent Frame* (blog), April 30, 2012, <http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2012/04/30/nahdas-return-to-history>.
- 46 These critics point to the democratic backsliding witnessed in Turkey. Once the AKP consolidated its powers, it became less interested in compromise and less tolerant of political dissent.
- 47 Francesco Cavatorta and Fabio Merone, “Post-Islamism, Ideological Evolution and ‘La Tunisianité’ of the Tunisian Islamist Party al-Nahda,” *Journal of Political Ideologies*, forthcoming.
- 48 Soumaya Ghannoushi, “Misconceptions of Political Islam,” *Huffington Post*, November 16, 2014, [www.huffingtonpost.com/soumaya-ghannoushi/misconceptions-of-politic\\_b\\_6166086.html?utm\\_hp\\_ref=tw](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/soumaya-ghannoushi/misconceptions-of-politic_b_6166086.html?utm_hp_ref=tw).
- 49 Ennahdha, for example, agreed to drop references to Islamic law in the new constitution.
- 50 Asef Bayat, “New Texts Out Now: Asef Bayat, Post-Islamism: The Changing Faces of Political Islam,” *Jadaliyya*, November 14, 2013, [www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/15049/new-texts-out-now\\_asef-bayat-post-islamism\\_the-cha](http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/15049/new-texts-out-now_asef-bayat-post-islamism_the-cha).
- 51 See C. Lussato’s interview with Francois Burgat, “Tunisie: le retrait d’Ennahda n’est pas l’échec de l’Islam politique,” *Le Nouvel Observateur*, October 29, 2013, <http://tempsreel.nouvelobs.com/monde/20131029.OBS3037/tunisie-le-retrait-d-ennahda-n-est-pas-un-echec-de-l-islam-politique.html>.
- 52 Cavatorta and Merone, “Post-Islamism, Ideological Evolution and ‘La Tunisianité’ of the Tunisian Islamist Party al-Nahda.”
- 53 See Anouar Boukhars, “In the Crossfire: Islamists’ Travails in Tunisia,” Carnegie Paper, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 2014; Fabio Merone and Francesco Cavatorta, “Salafist Mouance and Sheikh-ism in the Tunisian Democratic Transition,” Working Papers in International Studies 7, Center for International Studies, Dublin City University, 2012; Torelli, Merone, and Cavatorta, “Salafism in Tunisia: Challenges and Opportunities for Democratization”; International Crisis Group, *Tunisia: Violence and the Salafi Challenge*, Middle East/North Africa Report no. 137, February 13, 2013.

- 54 Aaron Y. Zelin, "Jihadi Soft Power in Tunisia: Ansar al-Shari'ah's Convoy Provides Aid to the Town of Haydrah in West Central Tunisia," *Al-Wasat, the Muslim World, Radicalization, Terrorism, and Islamist Ideology* (blog), February 21, 2012.
- 55 See Boukhars, "In the Crossfire: Islamists' Travails in Tunisia."
- 56 International Crisis Group, "Tunisia's Borders (II): Terrorism and Regional Polarisation," Middle East and North Africa Briefing no. 41, October 21, 2014.
- 57 See Stefano M. Torelli, "A Portrait of Tunisia's Ansar al-Shari'a Leader Abu Iyad al-Tunisi: His Strategy on Jihad," Jamestown Foundation, *Militant Leadership Monitor* 4, issue 4 (August 2013): 9–11.
- 58 See Stefano M. Torelli, "Tunisia's Elusive Jihadist Network," Jamestown Foundation, *Terrorism Monitor* 11, issue 12 (June 2013): 4–6, and Stefano M. Torelli, "Meeting the Jihadi Challenge in Tunisia: The Military and Political Response," Jamestown Foundation, *Terrorism Monitor* 11, issue 17 (September 2013): 5–7.
- 59 See Amnesty International, *Tunisia: New Draft Anti-Terrorism Law Will Further Undermine Human Rights*, Amnesty International note to the European Union EU-Tunisia Association Council, September 30, 2003.
- 60 International Crisis Group, "Tunisia's Borders (II): Terrorism and Regional Polarisation."
- 61 See Asma Ghribi, "In Tunisia, It's Shoot First, Ask Questions Later," *Foreign Policy*, February 17, 2014.
- 62 See Julie Schneider, "Le dilemme tunisien face au terrorisme," *OrientXXI*, March 6, 2014.
- 63 International Crisis Group, "Tunisia's Borders (II): Terrorism and Regional Polarisation."
- 64 Ibid.
- 65 Ibid.
- 66 In the first half of 2014, foreign investment decreased by 15 percent compared to the same period in 2013. Exports have also gone down. About 1.5 million Tunisians live on the edge of subsistence, with less than two dollars a day, a number that has doubled in the last few years. The country's manufacturing sector remains at near stagnation as the economy contracts and demand in Europe fails to pick up. Textiles and electronics barely grew by 1 percent, while the hydrocarbon sector shrank by 15 percent. While the number of employees working in the phosphates sector has doubled since the revolution, strikes and other labor unrest led output to be sliced by half. The Tunisian Company of Electricity and Gas is also on the ropes as it struggles with sporadic strikes and the refusal of some consumers to pay their bills. On August 31, 2014, a grid failure caused blackouts in the capital and in tourist zones in the coastal areas.
- 67 Charlotte Bozonnet, "Une économie mal en point," *Le Monde*, September 8, 2014, [www.lemonde.fr/economie/article/2014/09/08/une-economie-mal-en-point\\_4483541\\_3234.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/economie/article/2014/09/08/une-economie-mal-en-point_4483541_3234.html).
- 68 Since the revolution, the predators of the Ben Ali family have been sidelined but the intermediaries of the predatory economy are still ubiquitous in such strategic sectors as real estate, construction, transport, and wholesale trade in agricultural products. The bureaucratic restrictions that suffocated competition and enabled crony capitalism still exist. This subversion of regulatory and political institutions by the powerful directly contributes to adverse economic and social outcomes. Unless past economic policies change, a small number of well-placed people will continue to benefit from the system at the expense of the masses.
- 69 The 2010 uprising, which originated in the interior, testifies to the desperation of a region battered by soaring inequality, high unemployment, and shattered expectations. Those who eke out a living in the limited but very low-wage industry jobs remain trapped by a rising cost of living.

- 70 Sybille De Larocque, "Tunisie: malgré le vote de la Constitution, la révolution n'est pas terminée," JOL Press, February 6, 2014, [www.jolpress.com/tunisie-vote-constitution-revolution-francois-hollande-article-824307.html](http://www.jolpress.com/tunisie-vote-constitution-revolution-francois-hollande-article-824307.html).

## **Carnegie Endowment for International Peace**

The **Carnegie Endowment for International Peace** is a unique global network of policy research centers in Russia, China, Europe, the Middle East, and the United States. Our mission, dating back more than a century, is to advance the cause of peace through analysis and development of fresh policy ideas and direct engagement and collaboration with decisionmakers in government, business, and civil society. Working together, our centers bring the inestimable benefit of multiple national viewpoints to bilateral, regional, and global issues.

---

The **Carnegie Middle East Program** combines in-depth local knowledge with incisive comparative analysis to examine economic, socio-political, and strategic interests in the Arab world. Through detailed country studies and the exploration of key cross-cutting themes, the Carnegie Middle East Program, in coordination with the Carnegie Middle East Center, provides analysis and recommendations in both English and Arabic that are deeply informed by knowledge and views from the region. The Carnegie Middle East Program has special expertise in political reform and Islamist participation in pluralistic politics throughout the region.





BEIJING

BEIRUT

BRUSSELS

MOSCOW

WASHINGTON

# THE GLOBAL THINK TANK



**CARNEGIE**  
ENDOWMENT FOR  
INTERNATIONAL PEACE

[CarnegieEndowment.org](http://CarnegieEndowment.org)