Ennahda's Uneasy Exit From Political Islam

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In Brief

In 2016, Islamist political party Ennahda decided to abandon preaching and focus on politics, precipitating an identity crisis within the party. It faced new challenges, including rethinking the role of Islam, addressing its own neutralization as a driver of socioeconomic change, and managing its core supporters while appealing to a broader electorate. Ennahda's shift to politics has forced it to rethink its ideological framework and rebuild its legitimacy based on arguments other than religion.

Key Points

- Ennahda's landmark decision to become a purely political party—rather than a movement also engaged in religious proselytizing—marked a radical change of strategy and redefined its identity.
- The end of Ennahda's Islamist project was a consequence of internal and external pressures, born out of pragmatism and transactional politics. Ennahda had to make concessions, notably during the 2013–2014 National Dialogue, to guarantee and consolidate its participation in Tunisia's transition to democracy.
- Since its decision in 2016, Ennahda has been struggling to find the appropriate place for Islam in its political project.
- Despite good electoral results since 2011, Ennahda's attempts to further develop a support base on grounds other than religion will likely be contingent on in its ability to position itself as an effective governing force and propose viable policy solutions to Tunisia's social and economic challenges.

Key Findings

- Moving away from an Islamist ideology means rethinking the party's relationship with Tunisia's religious sphere, its current constituency, and the wider conservative electorate. Managing the party's core constituency will be a particular challenge, given that the 2014 constitution did not end politically driven battles over identity.
- Prioritizing consensus seeking has weakened the party's image as a driver of socioeconomic change. By governing in a coalition with old regime members and acquiescing to neoliberal economic policies, Ennahda has lost its ability to activate socioeconomic reform and anticorruption arguments to rebuild its legitimacy and support base.
- Although Ennahda initiated a strategy in 2018 to diversify its representatives and membership, this revealed divisions between older members and new careerists. Ennahda's success moving forward is dependent on the leadership's capacity to manage this divide and rebuild a new identity that satisfies the old guard and appeals to new members and voters.

Introduction

When Tunisia's Islamist party, Ennahda, made the landmark decision in 2016 to turn away from its religious roots and focus exclusively on politics, it marked a sea change in the movement's strategy.[1] The determination to cease proselytizing activities and "specialize" in politics was officially affirmed during the party's Tenth General Congress in May 2016. Rached Ghannouchi, Ennahda's president and longtime leader while the movement was underground, explained that this transformation was not just a means of exiting political Islam to enter "Muslim democracy,"[2] but also the natural outcome of the party's full participation in a democratic society. "We would like to promote a new Ennahda, to renew our movement and to put it into the political sphere, outside any involvement with religion. Before the revolution we were hiding in mosques, trade unions, [and] charities, because real political activity was forbidden. But now we can be political actors openly," he said.[3]

Specialization (*takhassus*) denotes the complete separation of political action from preaching (*dawa*). Focusing exclusively on electoral politics means Ennahda has to set aside its historical mission as a revivalist movement inspired by the Muslim Brotherhood, which sought the Islamization of society through preaching and cultural activities.[4] From these Islamist origins, Ennahda today aims to project itself as a conservative political force capable of managing public affairs and achieving compromise and consensus with Tunisia's secularist parties. With this change has come a deemphasis on its religious foundation, a shift away from the ideology of political Islam, and the dedication of human and financial resources to electoral politics. In other words, specialization is an attempt to redefine the relationship between religion and politics. It is meant to release political activity from religious considerations on the one hand and free religious stances and activities from political manipulation on the other.

Ennahda's leadership insisted that Tunisia's transition to democracy, along with the complex domestic and regional political environments, required the party to adapt. However, the 2016 decision to redirect exclusively toward electoral politics, though approved by most delegates to the party congress, remains problematic. Diluting the emphasis on Islam in Ennahda's ideology has led to an identity crisis, which will continue to create considerable challenges for the party as it reevaluates Islam as a frame of reference, grapples with the party's neutralization as a driver of social change, and manages its core supporters at a time when it must also appeal to a broader electorate.

While the specialization decision implied a total restructuring—in which all Ennahda activities related to proselytizing would be detached from the party and either dissolved or assigned to independent civil society and religious organizations—that complete separation has yet to occur. This reveals the ambivalence that prevails more than three years after Ennahda's landmark decision about its identity. Exiting political Islam, in all its aspects, is hardly a foregone conclusion.

After decades spent as an underground group in opposition to the authoritarian regimes of Tunisian president Habib Bourguiba and his successor, Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, Ennahda has had to make consequential choices since its legalization in 2011. It has changed from an illegal opposition movement to a legitimate party that wields power and competes for votes in a pluralistic setting. With its decision to specialize in politics, Ennahda renounced political Islam as its overall guiding framework, but the party is still figuring out how to proceed from there and what place to assign Islam in its new "Muslim democracy" project. How Ennahda chooses to address this identity crisis will not only have an impact on the future of its fragile national and international legitimacy. It will also entail consequences for the entire Tunisian democratic experiment, which Ennahda has taken a lead role in shaping since 2011.

Ennahda's Journey From Preaching to Politics

Ennahda's decision to specialize was the end result of internal debates over the relationship between politics and religion that have shaped the movement since the 1970s. The hostile political environment in which Ennahda emerged also influenced this gradual transformation. Under authoritarian and repressive regimes in Tunisia, the movement long prioritized its survival and was unwilling to risk fragmentation by choosing between proselytism and political action. However, after the 2011 revolution, the movement became a legal political actor and participated in government with skeptical secular partners, accelerating the urgency to settle the issue.[5]

The movement that would become Ennahda first emerged among conservative swaths of the population in the 1960s, in reaction to fears of Westernization in postindependence Tunisia. After Tunisia gained independence from France in 1956, its first president, Habib Bourguiba, initiated a modernization process that dismantled traditional religious institutions and marginalized the religious establishment. This modernization program sought not only the confiscation of assets used to fund mosques, Quranic schools, and charities, but also reform of the religious curriculum of Al-Zaytouna Mosque, the premier educational and Islamic institution in Tunisia.[6] Polygamy was prohibited and a personal-status code that promoted women's rights was adopted by presidential decree in 1957.[7]

In the late 1960s, a group of young men motivated to defend Tunisia's Islamic identity founded the Islamic Group (al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya). Led by Rached Ghannouchi, Abdelfatah Mourou, and Hmida Ennaifer, and inspired in part by the Tablighi School—a nonpolitical missionary movement focused on religious education—the Islamic Group was a *dawa* movement that promoted the teaching and practice of a pure form of Islam. It sought to revive Islam in the public sphere through preaching in mosques and an emphasis on individual piety, morality, and righteousness.[8] It also rejected both Bourguiba's modernization project and the country's traditional religious elites, who

were perceived as old-fashioned or co-opted by the dictatorship. Initially operating underground, Islamic Group activists found an unexpected ally to help them expand their outreach in the Islamic wing of the ruling party, the Socialist Destourian Party (PSD).[9] The Islamic wing of the PSD aimed to counter the far left and advocated for the Islamization and Arabization of Tunisian society by supporting the activism of the young preachers through the Association for the Safeguard of the Quran, an official and legal channel created in 1967.

The Islamic Group's expansion in the late 1960s and 1970s was not just the result of religious or spiritual demand. Socioeconomic factors also played a crucial role in widening its appeal. The Islamist movement was particularly attractive to members of the "new social periphery" who emerged after independence in rural and semirural areas.[10] This included graduates of religious and classical education institutions who saw their social advancement thwarted by the country's modernization reforms under Bourguiba, and young people from modest backgrounds who had access to free public education but still could not benefit through social promotion. Both groups were marginalized by the new, Westernized bourgeoisie.[11] In addition, Islamic Group activists, many from Tunisia's marginalized south and interior regions, opposed the sociocultural values championed by secular elites.[12] For these marginalized segments of society, Islam became the foundation for a socioreligious movement and provided a political narrative to mobilize the masses.

In the late 1970s, following the expansion of *dawa* activities to universities through the opening of faculty mosques, Islamic Group activists increasingly began to advocate for the politicization of the movement. This development was largely due to activists coming into contact with both leftist and PSD students, and their exposure to political ideologies as campuses became grounds for intellectual rivalries.[13] The 1979 Iranian Revolution also played a crucial role in inspiring the Islamic Group's decision to engage in political activism.[14] With the university branch of the Islamic Group advocating to politicize the movement in opposition to Bourguiba's secularization and authoritarian policies, the leadership moved to adapt to the students' activism and prevent a split. The Islamic Group adopted the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood, which promotes Islam as a political, economic, and social system that transcends the framework of religion and faith to cover all aspects of people's lives.

In 1979, the Islamic Group changed its name to the Mouvement de la Tendance Islamique (MTI), or Harakat al-Ittijah al-Islami. This marked the birth of the first Tunisian political Islamist movement that encouraged both preaching and political activism. This period also saw the emergence—and, later, the departure—of a group of intellectuals within the MTI known as the Islamist progressives. This breakaway faction articulated a progressive interpretation of Islamic doctrine and advocated for an explicitly Tunisian identity narrative distinct from Muslim Brotherhood doctrine.[15]

The 1980s witnessed two significant developments within the MTI that would play a crucial role in influencing the political trajectory of the Ennahda movement after the 2011 Tunisian revolution. First, the Islamists demonstrated a willingness to engage in pluralist politics and coordinate with other opposition groups. Second, debate began within the movement on the relationship between sociocultural and political activism.

During the last decade of Bourguiba's rule, MTI activists increasingly aligned the movement's socioeconomic and political positions with those of other opposition groups opposed to the regime. This was spurred mainly by the government's confrontations with Tunisia's labor movement, which resulted in hundreds of deaths during the general strikes of 1978 and 1984. In 1981, MTI publicly declared its acceptance of multiparty politics and requested official recognition. This was rejected by the Bourguiba regime, which cracked down on the MTI and forced the movement underground. Despite the MTI's lack of legal status, Islamist activists still managed to coordinate with secular opposition parties, and many joined civil society organizations, such as the Tunisian League for Human Rights, and labor movements. By 1989, Islamists made up nearly 20 percent of the Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT).[16] This period reflected the Islamists' growing acceptance of pluralist politics and the need for coexistence with non-Islamist actors.

In the 1980s, foreshadowing the future debate over specialization, the MTI began to examine the relationship between sociocultural activism and political activism within the movement. Sociocultural activism aimed to champion Islamic values and transform Tunisian society through preaching, education, and cultural activities. Political activism aimed at building a strong opposition movement to Bourguiba's decadent regime. This reflected a sort of Islamization from below, whereas political activism implied Islamization from above. Because of the constrained political environment, this debate remained unresolved. However, the ambivalence about combining features of both the sociocultural movement (*haraka*) and the political party (*hizb*) continued to shape the trajectory of Tunisian Islamism.[17]

When Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali became president in 1987, MTI leaders hoped for better relations with the new regime. In 1988, MTI decided to take its political project a step further and changed its name to the Ennahda movement (Harakat Ennahda, or the Renaissance Movement), conforming to the Political Parties Law of 1988, which prohibited the creation of parties on religious or ethnic grounds. Despite not being granted official recognition, the movement participated in the 1989 parliamentary elections through independent lists. The electoral success of the Islamist lists, estimated to be 15 percent of the national vote and reaching 30 percent in some urban areas, threatened Ben Ali's regime, which began to see the Islamist movement as its primary opponent. In response, the government falsified the results and announced a victory for the new ruling party, the Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD).[18]

This brief political opening precipitated a crackdown on Ennahda networks. In 1990, thousands of the movement's activists were imprisoned, tortured, or subjected to other human rights violations. In response, many fled the country and went into exile, mostly in Europe. In the absence of any space for preaching under Ben Ali's authoritarian regime, investing in politics became almost the only option left for the leaders in exile to ensure the movement's survival. Ennahda also sought to counter the regime's attempts to isolate it from the rest of the opposition during this period by negotiating a rapprochement with secular opposition parties, by claiming allegiance to human rights and democratic politics.[19]

With the fall of the Ben Ali dictatorship in January 2011, Ennahda leaders' first priority was reactivating grassroots networks and rebuilding the movement's organizational structures in preparation for another foray into politics. Thirty years after its first request for legal recognition, Ennahda received an official license in March 2011 under the name "The Party of the Ennahda Movement."[20] More than 2,000 party offices were opened across the country in the lead up to the October 2011 elections to the Constituent Assembly.[21] Activists returning from exile—most notably Ghannouchi—met with traumatized grassroots members who had remained in Tunisia and suffered fierce repression. Some Ennahda officials characterized these encounters as reconnecting the exiled or imprisoned "head" with the persecuted and besieged "body."[22] The reconstruction or rebuilding of the movement was not without its challenges, however, especially in the highly political context of Tunisia's transition to democracy.

Ennahda managed to win first place in the 2011 elections with 37 percent of the vote. It allied with two secularist parties, Ettakatol and the Congress for the Republic (CPR), to lead what became known as the Troika government between 2011 and 2013. Ennahda's internal debate over politics versus preaching was also reopened in 2011. Specialization in partisan politics had been first broached as a topic of discussion in the 2000s, but the heavy hand of the Ben Ali dictatorship and divisions within the movement between those in exile and those in Tunisia prohibited examining such a critical issue.

During Ennahda's Ninth General Congress in 2012—the first one organized in Tunisia since 1990—strategic and ideological differences of opinion publicly emerged among members. The movement split into two camps: hard-liners, who wanted sharia, or Islamic law, to be the basis of lawmaking in Tunisia's yet-to-be-written constitution; and pragmatists, who argued for a more flexible approach.[23] However, amid the divide, the grassroots constituency's high expectations for meeting the 2011 uprising's objectives—namely to fight corruption and purge the political scene—preoccupied both the hard-liners and the pragmatists. With the leadership concerned about ending the congress with a show of unity, no major decisions were made on either specialization or the party's position on the role of sharia in the constitution.[24]

Participation in electoral politics not only influenced the movement's ideology but also had an impact on the party's political positioning. When Ennahda became a governing party in Tunisia in 2011, it was forced to manage national affairs as part of a ruling coalition. This meant that the party had to negotiate contentious issues on the nature of the country's emerging democracy with its secular coalition partners and endorse compromise policy choices.

Political polarization inside Ennahda, and in Tunisia as a whole, increased during 2013, precipitating a crisis for the country's emerging democratic experiment. In July, Tunisia's secular opposition took to the streets and threatened to withdraw from the National Constituent Assembly and interrupt the writing of the constitution. The protests came in reaction to the political assassination of two leftist leaders, Chokri Belaid and Mohamed Brahmi, in February and July 2013, respectively, and a growing number of attacks against security forces and state institutions by hard-line Salafists. Meanwhile, on July 3, Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood–led government was toppled in a coup d'état that ended the country's democratic moment.[25] In response, Ennahda recognized that it had to yield some ideological ground to preserve Tunisia's democracy and protect itself against a fate similar to its fellow Islamists in Egypt. The party began to forge compromises with secularists later that year during an unprecedented Tunisian national dialogue.

The National Dialogue: A Moment of Pragmatism and Transactional Politics

For Ennahda leaders, the decision to distance the movement from its ideological principles was guided by pragmatism and transactional political calculations. Both secularists and Islamists had to make concessions to guarantee and consolidate their participation in Tunisian democracy. The consensus around the 2014 constitution came as the result of a national dialogue between Islamists and secularists, including representatives of the former regime. Four civil society organizations known collectively as the Quartet (the UGTT; the Tunisian Confederation of Industry, Trade, and Handcrafts [UTICA]; the Tunisian Order of Lawyers; and the Tunisian Human Rights League) were instrumental in bringing the parties together and mediating among them.

The national dialogue contained three interdependent tracks, and the outcome of each was fundamental to the success of the entire process of national reconciliation and crisis management. The constitutional track sought to work out compromises on issues such as blasphemy, the role of sharia as a source of legislation, equality between men and women, and freedom of belief and conscience. Concessions from Islamists on these issues were fundamental to finalizing the constitution in January 2014 and moving on to the government track. The government track negotiated the composition of a new cabinet charged with governing the country until parliamentary and presidential elections could be held in October and November 2014, respectively. This track concluded with the agreed-upon resignation of the Ennahda-led government of Ali Laarayedh, which was replaced by an independent technocratic government. The electoral track was responsible

for developing mechanisms for electing members to the National Independent Electoral Commission, which was to organize the upcoming elections.

The new Tunisian constitution adopted in January 2014 settled disputes between secularists and Islamists as to the nature of the state. The constitution recognized Islam as a key identity marker for the Tunisian people. However, Ennahda abandoned its proposal to use sharia as a source of legislation in response to massive protests organized by secular forces and representatives of civil society. Calls for the criminalization of religious offenses such as blasphemy were also watered down, and the state's obligation to "protect the sacred" only warranted a cursory mention.[26] Making these concessions was not easy—Ennahda's leadership had to organize workshops and meetings with the party's more militant members to convince them that their doctrinal demands were untenable in the existing national and regional context.

Political pressure, both domestic and international, was a key driver in strengthening the influence of Ennahda's more pragmatic leaders who advocated for compromise. For instance, while hard-liners in Ennahda had argued to exclude former regime representatives from politics, the leadership core around Ghannouchi called for a practical form of national reconciliation, most notably with Nidaa Tounes, a newly created party built from a coalition of Bourguibists, secularists, and leftists.[27] The rapidly deteriorating regional environment following the Egyptian coup of July 2013 only reinforced the pragmatists' view that it was necessary to make peace with former regime officials and prevent Tunisia's destabilization.[28]

The argument for accommodation eventually won out, and Ennahda made a major political concession by voting against the exclusion of Ben Ali's officials and representatives.[29] This compromise and others helped define the national dialogue as a fundamental moment of pragmatic politics. Ennahda's leadership believes its concessions were and still are indispensable to preserving Tunisia's democratic experiment. In the end, the constitution guaranteed "a neutral state that is neither Islamist nor secular, but instead the champion of freedom of thought, belief, and religion."[30]

For the party's leadership, the affirmation of religious freedom and Muslim identity in Tunisia accomplished Ennahda's historical mission of rebuilding society according to principles inspired by Islam. With the Islamization of society no longer pertinent, Ennahda used its Tenth General Congress in 2016 to adapt its identity to the realities of the new constitution. During the congress, members finally settled the long-running internal debate over preaching versus politics with the decision to specialize exclusively in the political area. In justifying the momentous decision, Ennahda's leadership framed the move to forsake proselytism as a natural consequence of its commitment to the new constitution's principles and Tunisian democracy.[31]

The question of whether Ennahda's ideological shift was purely tactical or also a strategic move is a legitimate one. Ennahda demonstrated pragmatism and an ability to maneuver opportunistically, as it was forced to adapt to constraints and public pressure from secularist counterparts and the international community during 2013. However, the party's leadership adjusted to the new rules of a game that it helped establish. And by doing so, it transformed an external constraint into a driver of change for the party's ideology and identity. Thus, specialization is a strategic decision because of its implications for Ennahda's ideology moving forward, for the recruitment of future members, and for the party's goal of domestic and international recognition.

The choice of specialization—as opposed to simply separating into political and preaching branches, as Islamist movements in Morocco and Jordan have done—reflects Ennahda's commitment to a political path at the expense of religious activism.[32] Indeed, Islamist movements that combine proselytism and political activities in one organizational structure are often tempted to take ambiguous stances for fear of undermining their credibility with either their religious followers or their political constituents.[33] Conscious of the danger of pursuing two conflicting agendas simultaneously, Ennahda has engaged in a transformational process that aims to evolve in a more liberal direction and end the ambiguity over whether its decisions are motivated by politics or religion.

By strategically adopting specialization, Ennahda also targeted another reluctant audience: Tunisia's international partners. Many debates about political Islam among Western policy circles focus on whether Islamist movements are committed to democracy.[34] In a statement acknowledging international partners' apparent preference for secular groups, an Ennahda party official said, "Ennahda is not a good geopolitical actor. Tunisia is an extrovert country while Ennahda is an introverted political actor."[35] There is also little doubt that the turbulent regional environment and some Gulf states' extreme aversion to political Islam also contributed to Ennahda's decision to become a "normal" political actor. However, while the decision to abandon political Islam and focus on electoral politics helped Ennahda cope with various domestic and international pressures, specialization also forced the party to reckon with a new set of questions on its future nature and direction.

Specialization's Risky Outcomes

Specialization has created several challenges for Ennahda. The first is the need to reevaluate Islam as a basis for the party's political legitimacy and as a primary frame of reference. The second is that the decision neutralized the party as a driver of social change. The third is the need to develop a strategy for retaining Ennahda's core supporters while also appealing to a wider electorate. These challenges imply not only an ideological recasting but also a rethinking of the party's relations with the religious

sphere and the wider conservative electorate. Such a reassessment is crucial, as Ennahda has been losing a segment of its more devout followers (mainly Islamists) while also struggling to attract non-Islamist conservative voters. The discrepancy between Ennahda's current voter base and its desired electorate suggests that the party must move out of the strictly religious sphere and expand into other domains.

The strategy of specialization was a vital and logical step toward fulfilling Ennahda's decades-long quest for recognition and acceptance. As a party leader said, "Since the creation of the Islamist movement in 1981, we have been waiting for legal recognition. We only achieved legalization of the movement after the revolution of 2011. For thirty years, we were second-class citizens, and this created barriers between society and us."[36] However, Ennahda's origins in political Islam have made the party an outlier in Tunisian society, and many people find it difficult to accept the party as a so-called normal political actor.[37]

Even as Ennahda has officially moved from being in the opposition to governing and renounced preaching for politics, its strategic transformation has been cautious. The leadership decided not to change the name of the party during the 2016 General Congress, keeping the official moniker Party of the Ennahda Movement (or, more simply, the Ennahda movement). Interestingly, the statement announcing the decision to specialize, titled "Management of the Project: Specialization As a Strategic Choice," didn't define exactly what Ennahda's new project was.[38] Rather, Ennahda's current focus on electoral competition and the exercise of power imply the professionalization of the party as a goal in itself. This potentially risks deactivating some of its core support base, ending the sociocultural movement that Ennahda has historically represented in Tunisia. Ennahda's present identity crisis promises to have considerable consequences, especially if the party's new direction fails to catch on among Tunisian society.

Recalibrating the Place of Islam and Relations to the Religious Sphere

In leaving behind political Islam, Ennahda faces an old dilemma that Islamists have grappled with in pluralistic societies: how can Islam form the basis of political legitimacy and serve as a primary frame of reference in a democratic setting?[39] The political compromises Ennahda has made over the years have reshaped its relationship with the party's religious base and prompted it to revise its ideology to dilute its explicit religious identity. This is a complicated position for the party, as compromising with secularists over major issues such as the 2014 constitution did nothing to end politically driven battles over identity in Tunisia.

Today, Ennahda risks political isolation and a return to oppositional status if it takes sides in politically polarizing debates. By way of illustration, Ennahda has refrained from taking official positions on ideologically loaded identity and legal issues, such as equal inheritance rights for women, for fear of jeopardizing an agreed-upon consensus with secular parties on the one hand, and worries

over alienating its conservative support base on the other.[40] This cautious attitude has led to contradictory statements from the party's representatives, some of whom have defended traditional values while others have urged the party to abandon "the monopoly on protecting Islam."[41] These fissures within Ennahda reflect the party leadership's awareness of Tunisia's evolving religious beliefs and dynamics. At the same time, it have proven difficult for the party to navigate these murky waters.

Ennahda must articulate its new identity as new forms of religiosity are gaining popularity in Tunisia. In the years preceding the 2011 Arab uprisings, Salafist clerics based in Gulf states and preachers from the Levant, adopting a style similar to that of American televangelists, successfully grabbed Tunisians' attention on television and social media by promoting piety, moral values, and personal success.[42] Shifts in religiosity toward individualization and moral values weakened the appeal of traditional Islamist movements that advocate for the Islamization of society through a combination of political action and preaching, a stance the younger generation considers excessively dogmatic and rigid.[43] This shift in Tunisia was also assisted by the suppression of Ennahda under Ben Ali's regime, as the movement was not able to openly articulate a religious alternative.

Still, even after its legalization in 2011, Ennahda has not been able to devise a genuine religious position adapted to Tunisian voters, especially younger people. According to a polling expert, only 20 percent of new voters (aged eighteen years or older) voted for the party's candidates in 2014.[44] This means that the Ennahda electorate is mostly older, and a gerontocracy in the party seems to be fast approaching.

Ennahda's precarious position in the religious sphere means that moving to the center of the political spectrum is unavoidable. For one thing, voting patterns indicate that Ennahda cannot build its political and electoral strategy based exclusively on religion. Pious Tunisians are important for the party, but these people seem increasingly inclined to distinguish between religious beliefs and politics. Most are looking for the freedom to practice religion rather than a militant form of Islam. Plus, the freedom of belief guaranteed by democracy has lessened the need for religiously oriented political engagement. This shift is visible among Ennahda's voter base. According to surveys conducted by the Washington, DC–based International Republican Institute, Ennahda voters' support for granting Islam a significant role in government dramatically decreased from 84 percent in 2014 to 62 percent in 2017. The belief that religion should have a role in politics decreased at a much higher rate among Ennahda voters than among the Tunisian public overall, indicating that Ennahda voters' ideological realignment likely followed the party's shift on politics and preaching rather than caused it.[45]

At the same time, however, most Ennahda voters do not want to abandon Islam and their Muslim identity. Rather than defending rigorous religious principles and Islamic law, they seem attached to Islam as a frame of reference. This situation was summed up by one of Ennahda's leaders: "The

majority of Ennahda's voters are religiously observant people. Some of them are Salafists, of course. We estimate that only 10 percent of Salafists vote for us, and their proportion is decreasing because of the pragmatic choices made by Ennahda since 2014. However, it's obvious that many conservative people don't vote for us. They consider that Ennahda is too closed, too rigid. Only one-third of the conservative electorate votes for us. This is our big problem."[46]

Such observations suggest that Ennahda needs to engage a broader conservative electoral base. That means appealing to people who are attached to Islam as an identity marker, even if religion is not the main criterion that determines their vote. Appealing to these voters implies an inevitable recalibration of the role of Islam within a newly elaborated ideological framework.

For other observers, specializing in politics is problematic. As one Tunisian political expert noted, "Ennahda seems to be keen to progressively abandon religion. This might be good for Ennahda, politically speaking, but it could backfire. It would have been far better both for the country and for Ennahda if it undertook a reform of religious interpretation toward a more innovative and modernist understanding. Ennahda can leave political Islam, but Islam is still there, and it's still important for many Tunisians."[47]

Thus, Ennahda is facing a difficult choice: Exiting political Islam could well create a vacuum that would benefit other, more fundamentalist groups or Salafist movements.[48] But retaining Islam as an identity marker without offering a newly articulated ideology that connects religion and politics—one that translates Islamic values into concrete policies at the political, economic, and social level—will likely fail to satisfy both old supporters and potential new ones.[49]

The future of Ennahda will depend on how it recalibrates the role of Islam to move beyond ideology and toward identity politics. In other words, the challenge is to shift from classical Islamism—which emphasizes religion as a source of legislation, a reference for behavior in society, and a framework for good governance—toward a more generic conservatism. At the same time, Ennahda's move toward identity politics and the center right risks a rift with religiously devout constituents and activists, along with religious figures and organizations. In particular, these elements might reject the political pragmatism displayed by the party—visible in Ennahda's decisions to abandon *dawa*, drop the demand for sharia as a source of legislation, and commit to a civil state—as an abandonment of the movement's traditional religious values and supporters.

Thus, the challenge for Ennahda is to articulate a conservative vision and platform that affords Islam a prominent place in its rhetoric and concerns but does not pose a challenge to the fundamental basis of the political order. For example, Ennahda might push for a more Islamic-oriented educational system, or for alcohol-free hotels and beaches that offer prayer rooms, or advocate a foreign policy centered on strengthening relations with Muslim countries.[50] But these policy stances

should be formulated within democratic institutions and not challenge the freedom of belief, conscience, and respect for human rights to which Ennahda committed in the Tunisian constitution.

Abandoning Ambitions for Socioeconomic Change

Part of Ennahda's grassroots membership is disenchanted not only with the progressive dilution of the doctrinal aspects of the party's activities but also by the fact that the party so far has failed to be a driver of political, economic, and social change while in government.[51] The neutralization of Ennahda's historical position of championing socioeconomic reform is proving detrimental to the party's legitimacy—having abandoned Islamist ideology, the party can no longer use economics, either. Aligning with the government's agenda has meant that Ennahda's policy choices have become indistinguishable from representatives of the old regime.[52] In other words, the party is unable to attract new voters seeking more state support for socioeconomic struggles. Thus, the party's move to the center of the political spectrum raises the question of whether its capacity to expand, or even preserve, its electoral base can consolidate its role as a change agent in present-day Tunisia.

While in power, Ennahda has been unable to implement reforms. Despite heading a handful of ministries since 2014, the party has had marginal influence over the policymaking process. This incapacity is not just related to its status as a junior partner in a governing coalition since 2014. Ennahda led governments between 2011 and 2013 but was just as unable to push through bold reforms. Ennahda's members broadly agree that stepping down from government in 2013 and allying itself with Nidaa Tounes after the 2014 elections was a key step toward protecting the movement and Tunisia's democratic experiment during a particularly unpropitious period for political Islam. However, tensions within the party have emerged over its inability to proceed and promote tangible changes with either socioeconomic reforms or anticorruption efforts.[53]

In addition, setbacks in the transitional justice process have fed the disillusionment of Ennahda's grassroots members who were victims of the Bourguiba and Ben Ali regimes. Parliament's failure to establish the long-awaited constitutional court has also exacerbated concerns that Tunisia's transition to democracy is still uncertain, potentially reversible, and doesn't offer substantial guarantees against the risk of authoritarian or semi-authoritarian restoration scenarios.[54] These risks increase the pressure on the Ennahda leaders who chose specialization, as the party's constituency is unlikely to support transactional politics that fail to secure the survival of the movement, ensure the safety of its members, or consolidate nascent freedoms.[55]

Ennahda has lost the ability to promote an anticorruption platform as a result of its governing alliance with representatives of the former regime—a symbol of corruption and nepotism in Tunisia. This evolution is striking, given that, for decades, the movement aimed to represent social and political contention and mobilize the oppressed. During the 1980s, it looked to leftist groups for inspiration. Indeed, many of Ennahda's leaders embraced political activism because of their contacts

with left-wing groups while at university. Unlike many Islamist movements in the Arab world, which tack center-right on economic issues, Ennahda considered leftists and progressives worthy of emulation and drew from their ideology and organizational experience.[56]

While Ennahda was willing to compromise to secure its position in an uncertain democracy and an unstable regional environment, representatives of the former regime have used the consensus to neutralize contention and tame social anger even as they perpetuate their capture of the state. This "rotten compromise" explains both the conservative pace of the transition and the fragile stability that Tunisia is experiencing.[57] The neutralization of Ennahda's historical goal of effecting socioeconomic change has alienated part of its base and increased disenchantment among the Tunisian population by lending credibility to the notion that all politicians are the same and "only wish to share the cake" among themselves.[58]

The perception that Ennahda has been co-opted by the country's traditional elites and is serving the status quo has gained traction among the lower and middle classes. Despite its influence in parliament, Ennahda hasn't promoted key fiscal or land reforms due to its unwillingness to antagonize influential socioeconomic groups.[59] A prime example of the party's growing accommodation with elites occurred in 2015, when Ennahda parliamentarians voted to decrease taxes on imported alcoholic beverages. The move generated public derision as neither the party's social justice nor religious values could justify such a decision.

Ennahda has also supported reforms recommended by the International Monetary Fund that run counter to the economic interests of both its base and the Tunisian middle class voters the party has started targeting. Measures implemented include a freeze in public sector hiring, cuts in fuel subsidies, and an increase in electricity and gasoline prices.[60] This apparent turn toward neoliberalism and privileged elites has put Ennahda in a predicament well-described by one of its leaders: "We are getting trapped. We are forgetting people who always supported us, and serving people who always rejected us. Ironically, it makes me think of [Egyptian singer Mohammed] Abdel Wahab's song: 'I think of who is forgetting me and forget who is thinking of me.'"[61]

Ennahda's failure to promote socioeconomic reforms is partly related to its inability to recast political cleavages and move beyond the identity question. Because it aims to normalize its image among social and economic elites and craves recognition from national and international bodies, Ennahda has refrained from politicizing economic and regional inequalities or stoking social conflicts. To the contrary, the party has increasingly played down social antagonisms, hoping to appeal to different social groups with contradictory interests.

Because of its traditional electorate, Ennahda could still be a suitable representative for disenfranchised regions and the lower and middle classes, evidenced by the results of elections held

since 2011.[62] Indeed, over the past eight years, Ennahda has performed well in national and municipal elections. In the 2011 elections to the National Constituent Assembly, Ennahda won a plurality of the vote. In the 2014 parliamentary elections, Ennahda came in second with 27.7 percent; in the 2018 municipal election, Ennahda also came in second, behind the independent lists but ahead of all other political parties, with 28.6 percent of the vote. However, these figures also suggest that Ennahda's electoral base is contracting. This phenomenon is not specific to Ennahda but instead reflects the national climate of dissatisfaction with political parties. Therefore, Ennahda's alliance with former regime officials—and acquiescence to their policies—is not only a hindrance to the party widening its electoral base. It also threatens to demoralize a large part of its existing support base, which feels this political strategy has reaped neither symbolic nor economic rewards.

The socioeconomic circumstances in Tunisia require that Ennahda redefine its current position and elaborate a strategic economic and political vision—one that goes beyond short-term political calculations and maneuvering designed to ensure the survival of the organization or its participation in power sharing.[63] This may prove too tricky for Ennahda to achieve, due to the population's apathy and general disenchantment toward a representative democracy that is unable to deliver tangible progress on social or economic fronts.

Looking for a Wider Electorate

Ennahda realized that Islamization was not the answer to socioeconomic challenges and chose to focus on developing public policies instead of ideology. For the party's leadership, heading a governing coalition between 2011 and 2013 and participating in unity governments since 2015 revealed two main requirements. The first was the importance of building the party's credibility as a political actor that could legitimately aspire to govern the country. The second was the crucial need for both domestic and international recognition. To accomplish these goals, Ennahda has sought to expand its membership beyond its traditional religious base to include more professionals and career politicians. However, this expansion has also forced the party to balance the demands of old and new members, who often hold differing conceptions of Ennahda as a party, how it should formulate policy, and what it should be advocating for.

For an Islamist movement that spent decades engaged in religious activism while underground and in exile, the ability to participate in national politics marked the start of a new phase in its history. As an Ennahda official put it, "In 2011, we left dissident political Islam to enter electoral politics. This was a big change. We have been participating in post-2011 governments, with the exception of the technocratic one in 2014, and I must say, we still have a lot to learn about electoral politics."[64] By focusing on the practical processes of understanding how to become a political party and rule effectively, Ennahda's leadership realized the overriding importance of coherent public policy.

One significant challenge Ennahda has faced since 2011 is learning how to govern and make state institutions work. As one of Ennahda's leaders said, "Basically, we at Ennahda didn't know until 2011 what the state was. We have opposed it for forty years. We have suffered its violent repression, its oppression, and its exclusion. When we took the reins in 2011, we lacked the resources and the networks. We understood very little of administration and bureaucracy, so we were not able to govern effectively."[65] In government, Ennahda has gained valuable exposure to power relations involving entrenched networks of privilege and interests, the practical nature of political action, the need for expertise and technocratic know-how, and the importance of serious, developed economic programs. Operating inside the halls of power has also wised Ennahda to the extent of resistance to reform by lobbies, entrenched interest groups, and some representatives of the old regime.

Participation in government has also taught Ennahda a few lessons about the powerlessness of Islamist ideology when it comes to designing public policy and managing Tunisia's economic, social, and developmental challenges. By 2016 the movement had become painfully aware of how difficult it was to balance tackling reform, developing new social and economic policies, and dealing with the heavy legacy of the former dictatorship. As an official in the movement said, "Ennahda is simply immodest if it wants to do everything: politics, preaching, education, culture. It's simply impossible."[66]

Given these challenges, Ennahda's leadership has prioritized channeling resources to party politics and the recruitment of professionals and technocrats. These moves are vital for raising Ennahda's profile as a legitimate ruling party—one able to reform Tunisia and address its numerous economic problems. Today, Tunisia's political actors must somehow tackle reform of the country's welfare system and subsidy regimes, and of the education, health, and transport sectors. Ennahda also anticipates that privatization of state-owned companies and reforms to the public sector will fuel popular opposition, particularly from the influential UGTT labor union. Enacting the necessary measures will potentially require reducing state subsidies for a broad range of services, reconsidering existing pension schemes, and diluting the economic privileges enjoyed by some of the country's elite who benefited from decades of crony capitalism.

The specialization strategy and subsequent channeling of resources to electoral competition spurred Ennahda to revise its recruitment process. The 2016 General Congress officially removed the two-year probationary period before full membership in the party. These amended recruitment procedures reflected Ennahda's desire to attract new members from outside Islamist circles who might be more interested in political activism.[67]

Electoral competition also pushed Ennahda to implement a "strategy of openness" intended to broaden the party's electoral and support base.[68] For the municipal elections of May 2018, the party opened its lists to independent candidates. This tactic was designed to increase Ennahda's appeal

among conservative social groups and individuals that did not share its core constituency's religious ethos but favorably viewed the party's move to the center and thus might be interested in pursuing a political career under its umbrella. In the end, this strategy diversified Ennahda's municipal council candidate profiles and attracted new upper-middle-class representatives.

Ennahda's choice of candidates for the elections was based on competence and focused on their work-related and sociological profile, specifically targeting professionals such as engineers, lawyers, professors, and doctors. One of Ennahda's leaders explained this approach by saying, "We tried to attract people who have skills, who have expertise in managing local affairs. Some of them were in the Democratic Constitutional Rally—the ruling party under the dictatorship. It was also an attempt to say that we are not against these people, and we are open to people who served the former regime. We are against the oppressive system they served but not against these people."[69] Along with promoting pragmatic local managers and capitalizing on their expertise and local networks, Ennahda also aimed to adapt to the realism of local politics by presenting candidates who were less ideologically aligned. In that sense, local elections were an opportunity to readjust the party's focus and dilute religious references. More pragmatically, this strategy was an attempt to adapt the organization and its representatives to political competition at the local level, where candidates win votes by building their profile and mobilizing social networks.

Around 4,000 independent candidates ran on Ennahda's electoral lists for the 2018 municipal elections. Ennahda came in second, after the independent lists, winning 30 percent of municipal council seats.[70] Of the 2,139 municipal council positions won by Ennahda, half were filled by independent members who did not formally belong to the party.

This strategy of openness did not go unquestioned, however. As one of the party's leaders who was skeptical about including independent candidates on Ennahda's lists observed, "We can't say that this strategy broadened our electoral base. Many interesting profiles are now representing the party. That's true! But it would be an exaggeration to say that it increased the appeal of Ennahda to a new electorate. It served mainly to attract individuals."[71]

Reaching out to independents and non-Islamists undoubtedly increased the diversity of party representatives by mixing careerists with old militants, but this has not come without tensions. The main divide between the two groups lies in their different perceptions of and reasons for political engagement. For the older members, political affiliation with Ennahda is driven by devotion. They recall when membership in the movement was a highly risky endeavor, and their experiences with repression under the Ben Ali regime have built a shared memory of trauma and resistance. The sacrifices made by the older generation have become a celebrated feature of the party's history. This legacy serves to legitimize the current leadership while also acting as an insidious barrier to the integration of new members who don't share the same experiences.

For careerists, affiliation with Ennahda is a vehicle for building professional expertise, personal skills, technocratic know-how, and social connections. There are also other material and symbolic benefits of participating in government (including favors, honors, notability, salaries, influence, and the expansion of personal networks).[72] These individuals bring with them a new understanding of political activism and fresh approaches to politics, which are less ideological and often antagonistic to Ennahda's grassroots members. These differing perspectives and priorities have created tensions between the two groups. The discomfort of old militants is even higher vis-à-vis careerists who previously served in the former regime.

Interestingly, Ennahda did not renew its strategy of openness in selecting candidates for parliamentary elections scheduled for October 2019. Instead, the party organized internal elections to choose its representatives. The reversal of this policy meant to diversify Ennahda's candidates is a sign that the older, more militant wing has likely gained the upper hand against new careerists in defining the future direction of the party.

Despite the decision to specialize and the strategy of openness in 2018, the internal structure of Ennahda is still an obstacle to expanding the party. Over the decades, it has developed into a closed hierarchical group tied together not only by the bonds of ideology but also by networks of personal and familial relationships, as well as a strong sense of organizational loyalty. While representing a source of solidarity and cohesion, these characteristics also represent a challenge for opening the party up to new members and representatives who don't share the same ethos and militant experience of old members. Thus, strategies to build the party's capacities and diversify its representatives, membership, and constituency are highly dependent on the leadership's capacity to manage its newfound heterogeneity and rebuild an identity that appeals to both current members and attracts new adherents. In particular, Ennahda must overcome the perception that it is a closed sect if it genuinely wants to transform into a center-right political actor that appeals to the broad conservative electorate.

Conclusion: Whither Ennahda?

In exiting political Islam, Ennahda was bound to face a crisis. Its ideological and organizational decision to participate in Tunisian politics as a party, rather than a religiously based movement, has sown confusion as to the organization's identity and goals.

Even as it continues moving toward center-right conservatism, Ennahda will most likely accord Islam a place in its narrative. As an instrument of identity politics, Islam can guide certain policy proposals, but within a democratic context to reassure secularist political forces that remain skeptical

about Ennahda's commitment to democracy. However, identity battles should not motivate any backsliding in the party's specialization strategy. Further success in this transformation will require a carefully tailored and inclusive approach that aligns with different forms and degrees of religiosity, from those of pious, observant Tunisians to those of nonpracticing Muslims who nevertheless adhere to conservative values.

As key ideological pillars of the party have disappeared, Ennahda has seen part of its electoral base melt away. De-emphasizing proselytism, allying with a regime it once opposed, and investing in electoral politics have all exacerbated the confusion about Ennahda's identity. What precisely does the party stand for? Does Ennahda prioritize electoral competition above all else, even at the cost of potential socioeconomic reform it could help effect? For some of Ennahda's leadership and base, winning elections is not an objective as such if it does not lead to greater social justice and a redistribution of power and wealth in the country. If Ennahda is prioritizing electoral success above all else, that implies it has bought into the system of entrenched interests that shape power and wealth-sharing in Tunisia that it opposed for decades. Both Ennahda's leaders and grassroots constituents agree on the importance of preserving the democratic institutions and on the fundamental basis of the democratic political order, but they don't agree on the party's role within this system. Ennahda's ability to keep alive hope for change while negotiating a modern electoral landscape will be critical to its continued survival as a party.

Overall, the current confusion over the party's identity is related to lingering indecision over what kind of party Ennahda wants to be and what its identifiable base is. The cessation of proselytism means an end to the movement functionally if not officially. However, political participation in an uncertain democracy and the socioeconomic constraints under which Ennahda operates make it difficult to discern precisely what form this party will take and what its mission will be. Will it be a professionalized party focusing on electoral competition and the efficient management of the state, taking advantage of its representation at the local and national levels to access financial and political resources? In other words, will it become a sort of electoral machine in which the distinction between party members and nonmembers becomes blurred? Or will it be a party that prioritizes the expansion of its constituency, the articulation of an ideological and policy platform, and the promotion of social justice while preserving its Islamic reference?

Trying to balance these two distinct pathways could maintain the unity of Ennahda for a while but will likely become a source of division eventually. The party's increasing involvement in political competition has necessitated controversial changes to its recruitment and organizational structures—such as the 2018 strategy of openness. Organizational issues are key for the cohesion and unity of Islamist movements. On the rare occasions that Islamist movements have split, it has usually been over how to organize and act, not over ideology.[73]

Ennahda's ongoing transformation affords crucial insights into an Islamist movement's trajectory in a pluralistic and democratic environment. Perhaps more importantly, its unfolding and unfinished normalization informs us about the ambivalence of electoral success and ideological failure in an Islamist movement.[74] Islamism can be used effectively to mobilize people but not for governing them. Indeed, Ennahda's shift toward pragmatism at the expense of its founding ideology makes the case that, although an Islamist narrative might win elections, it keeps failing to fulfill its constituents' varied expectations.[75] Ennahda's unfinished transition could prove that an Islamist movement can adapt to a democratic context and win elections by transforming its ideology and organization, and widening its electoral base beyond its traditional religious core supporters. Ennahda's prospects are bound to influence how other Islamist movements attempt to legitimize themselves and navigate challenges within pluralistic political settings in the future.[76]

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