

A response to Sayida Ounissi's, "[Ennahda from within: Islamists or 'Muslim Democrats'?](#)"

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Editor's note: As part of Brookings's [Rethinking Political Islam](#) project, we've asked a select group of outside scholars to react and respond to the overall project, in order to draw attention to potential blind spots, trends of note, and more.

In March, Ennahda MP Sayida Ounissi contributed a [rich reflection](#) to the [Rethinking Political Islam](#) series. Her remarks presaged key decisions taken at Ennahda's 10th congress, held May 20-23. Here, I'll engage briefly with just two of the fascinating themes Ounissi raised—Ennahda's integration as a Tunisian actor and re-labelling as "Muslim democrats"—and connect those themes directly to Ennahda's recent congress.

Ounissi first confronts accusations, common amongst secularly oriented Tunisians who have opposed Ennahda on ideological grounds, that Ennahda was birthed in the *Mashriq* (Arab East) and lacks proper Tunisian bona fides. Instead of representing the local branch of a shady international Muslim Brotherhood cabal, though, [Ounissi argues](#) Ennahda has pursued a "very nationally grounded trajectory" since its inception, guided by leading figures in Tunisia's reformist and Zaytounian schools of thought.¹

The author thanks the European Research Council's WFAW program, at which she is a doctoral fellow, for supporting her research.

¹ See Sayida Ounissi, "Ennahda from within: Islamists or 'Muslim Democrats?'" in *Rethinking Political Islam*, The Brookings Institution, March 2016, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2016/03/annahda-islamists-muslim-democrats-ouniss>. The Zaytouna, an 8th century mosque in Tunis, was home to a vibrant tradition of Tunisian religious thought spanning law, philosophy, and politics.

Ounissi's emphasis on the "Tunisianness" of Ennahda's intellectual history formed an essential sub-theme at Ennahda's tenth congress. In his opening address on May 20th, party president Rached Ghannouchi claimed Ennahda's support for unity and national reconciliation is not a "*safqa taht al-tawila*" (under the table deal) but anchored in Ennahda's view of Tunisian history:

Ennahda is a force for unity and togetherness, not for separation and division. So we see Khaireddine al-Tunsi, Ahmed Bey, Moncef Bey, the late *za'im* [leader] Habib Bourguiba, Farhat Hachad, Abdelazziz Thaalbi, Salah Ben Youssef, Sheikh Mohamed Tahar Ben Achour, and Tahar Haddad, God's mercy be upon them and others, as symbols of our beloved nation.²

Ghannouchi asserted—before a crowd of 13,000 *nahdawis* (Ennahda members) and on national television—an inclusive re-remembering of Tunisian history, one that embraced both former president Habib Bourguiba (president from 1957 to 1987) and his arch rival Salah Ben Youssef, politicians whose struggle for control of the anti-colonial movement foreshadowed important class-based and cultural rifts between Tunisia's interior and coast—rifts that divide demographics favoring Ennahda and Nidaa Tunis.

Despite the pride of place Bourguiba holds in Tunisia's collective memory, some Tunisians—particularly those from interior, more religious, and more Arabophone backgrounds—resent the favoritism he showed Tunisia's *sahel* (northern coastal) regions and steps he took to weaken Tunisia's traditional religious institutions. Ennahda supporters have historically been amongst such critics of Bourguiba, not least because of the hostility with which Bourguiba approached Ennahda and its leaders throughout much of the 1980s.³

In his 2014 campaign for president, Beji Caid Essebsi played both on nostalgia for Bourguiba and historical tensions between Bourguiba and Ennahda. Promising to restore *haybat al-dawla* (state prestige) by re-empowering Tunisia's traditional political class, Essebsi ran as a present-day incarnation of Bourguiba—impersonating even his dress and speech patterns. This fueled Ennahda supporters' fears that Essebsi

² From recording of Ghannouchi's speech taken by author. See also transcript of Ghannouchi's speech in Ennahda's newspaper, *Al-Fajr*, printed May 22, 2016.

³ See Munson, Henry "Islamic Revivalism in Morocco and Tunisia." *The Muslim World* 76:3-4, 1986; Emma Murphy, *Economic and Political Change in Tunisia: from Bourguiba to Ben Ali*. Palgrave, 1999.

represented a continuation of Tunisia's autocratic past and intended to crack down on conservative Tunisians' freedom of peaceful expression and association.

Yet, despite such antipathies, Ennahda's 10th congress asserted, at least at the rhetorical and elite political levels, a historical reconciliation with Bourguibism. In perhaps the most quotable part of her reflection, Ounissi previewed this reconciliation, arguing one could call Ennahda's founding generation the "illegitimate children of Bourguiba" insofar as they supported "national independence, the necessity of a social renaissance, and modern governance tools."⁴

Recasting Ennahda as Bourguiba's long-lost, child helps the party rationalize post-hoc its alliance with Nidaa Tounes and with Bourguiba's great admirer Beji Caid Essebsi. Perhaps more importantly, though, forging a shared understanding of Tunisian history—one in which Ennahda is understood to have been molded by the some of the same forces of Tunisian reformism as influenced prominent anti-Islamist actors—forms a critical plank of Ennahda's longer-term effort to legitimize itself as a normal Tunisian political actor. Against depictions popularized under former dictator Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali (1987-2011) that painted Ennahda as a retrograde group of Wahhabi-inspired criminals, the party is slowly but surely hitting back, wrapping itself in the flag of Tunisian reformist intellectual history.

But, as Ounissi implies, this redoubled effort at Tunisifying Ennahda, or uncovering its pre-existing but long ignored Tunisianness, isn't merely tactical. It's part of a broader nationalization of Ennahda's thinking, and in the thinking of *Ikhwani* (Muslim Brotherhood-oriented) parties region-wide replacing larger international goals with an increasing focus on limited, national goals. Though Ennahda still sees itself as connected (albeit in a distinct, cousin-like way) to Morocco's PJD, Egypt's Brotherhood, and Turkey's AKP, it has come to see itself foremost as an essentially Tunisian actor, focused on the nationally limited goal of bringing pragmatic, Islam-inspired good governance to the Tunisian polity. Idealistic transnational aims—crafting an *ummah* beyond the Tunisian citizenry—have become the province not of Ennahda, but of Salafist groups.

Ounissi acknowledges it wasn't always this way. The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood's writings used to comprise Ennahda's "main philosophical food for thought." Yet, even then, Ounissi stresses that Ennahda members read and "re-interpreted that literature in the context of [their] own unique, local ideological environment."⁵ That's true. It's also true that essential pieces of the Brotherhood canon—for instance, the works of

⁴ Ounissi, 2016.

⁵ Ounissi, 2016.

Brotherhood founder Hassan al-Banna and firebrand thinker Sayyid Qutb—simply aren't as widely read or as resonant with nahdawis as they used to be.

Many nahdawis instead cite the work of an Algerian scholar, Malek Bennabi, as having a greater impact on Ennahda's thinking than Qutb's, especially since the 1990s. Bennabi's influence has come up many times in my interviews with Ennahda leaders and base-level supporters, and shows through in works written by Rached Ghannouchi in the 1990s. The scholars Francesco Cavatorta and Fabio Merone highlight the influence of Bennabi and the Tunisian/North African roots of Ennahda's intellectual heritage at some length in an article published last year. They note that as Ennahda outgrew the Qutb-inspired Ikhwani strand of thought, "a process of rediscovery of more local sources of ideological commitment to Islamism was initiated."⁶

That process, Cavatorta and Merone argue, has enabled Ennahda to view Tunisian modernity and reformism as originating not with secular symbols like Habib Bourguiba but from a deeper, shared history of Islamic reformist thinkers. Locating reformism in the Tunisian soil allows the party to position itself as a natural product of Tunisia's ecosystem rather than a wave washed in from the Wahhabi gulf.

Moreover, locating flexibility and reformism within the Islamic tradition has allowed Ennahda to understand itself not just as a Tunisian actor but as an authentically Islamist party, even as it has made compromises that contravene traditional expectations of what an Islamist party does (i.e. create an Islamic state and impose Shariah).

Cavatorta and Merone correctly argue that Ennahda has, from its point of view, "been able to fulfil the Islamic project by subscribing to a political system that enshrines liberty and justice"—principles it sees as fulfilling the ultimate objectives of Shariah.⁷ This squares with internal conversations and justificatory rationales Ennahda developed while making religious compromises—on Shariah, blasphemy, and more—throughout the 2012-2014 constitutional drafting process. For instance, [Ennahda came to accept the idea](#) that Shariah should not be mentioned in Tunisia's new constitution because that

⁶ Francesco Cavatorta and Fabio Merone, "Post-Islamism, ideological evolution, and 'la tunisianité' of the Tunisian Islamist party al-Nahda," *Journal of Political Ideologies*, Vol. 20, No. 1, 2015.

⁷ Cavatorta and Merone, 2015.

constitution upheld freedom, justice, and human dignity—higher principles and objectives of Shariah that superseded the importance of mentioning the word itself.⁸

Ennahda’s ability to rethink the meaning of Islamism in such an agile manner was shaped not only by tactical concerns but by a long process of internal reflection and dialogue that began well before Tunisia’s revolution, and was—as Ounissi notes—presaged in cross-ideological opposition talks that saw Ennahda forge key agreements with secular parties in during the 2000s.⁹

On a related note, Ennahda’s recent re-labelling as “Muslim democrats” reflects less a transformational rupture in how the party views itself than frustration with outsiders not understanding its supposedly true democratic nature. We can understand Ennahda’s re-labelling as also connected to this process of Tunisification. Through its rebranding, Ennahda hopes to be identified not as outsider Ikhwani Islamists but as a national Muslim democratic party sprung from the Tunisian soil—the same reformist soil that produced Abdelaziz Thaalbi, Habib Bourguiba, Tahar Hadad, and other guiding lights of Tunisia’s self-proclaimed modernists.

Interestingly, it should also be noted that those modernists—chief amongst them, leaders of Nidaa Tounes—prefer *not* to be called *‘almaniyeen* (secularists) for a very similar reason. The word secular in Tunisia often transmits negative connotations—marking one a product of European or even colonially imported ideas. Nidaa Tounes, aspiring to position itself as a powerful, locally accepted actor on the Tunisian political scene, hence identified as “a modern party for a Muslim people,” using the word “modernists” as a more palatable euphemism for “secularist.” One could argue that Ennahda is taking a similar approach to the word Islamist, swapping it for a more palatable label that avoids outsider connotations and aligns it instead with the Tunisian center, a center which both Ennahda and Nidaa Tounes understand to be Muslim, modern, and democratic—though each of these are malleable, quite vague terms that mean different things to different Tunisians (and hence possess the power to politically organize and inspire).

As Ounissi’s reflection indicates, adopting the term “Muslim democrat” indicates less a shift in how nahdawis see themselves—for they have seen themselves as Muslim

⁸ Monica Marks, “Convince, Coerce, or Compromise? Ennahda’s Approach to Tunisia’s Constitution.” The Brookings Institution, February 2014, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2014/02/10-ennahda-tunisia-constitution-marks>.

⁹ For more on the importance of these cross-ideological opposition talks, see Monica Marks, “Purists vs. Pluralists: Cross-Ideological Coalition Building in Tunisia” in Alfred Stepan, ed. *Tunisia’s Democratic Transition in Comparative Perspective*, forthcoming 2016.

democrats for some time now—than an effort to help media and outside actors understand the party on its own terms. Referencing common conflation of the term Islamism with ISIS, she says “it would be a waste of quite a lot of time and energy for us to take up the task of constantly distancing ourselves from a violent and dangerous ideology which is precisely the sort of model we are fighting against.” At the end of the day, Ounissi says, the term Muslim democrats more usefully communicates the positive connotations of what she claims Ennahda has been “trying to accomplish since the beginning” – namely “reconciling Islam and democracy in the Arab world.”¹⁰

As I discussed in the *Washington Post* this week, overblown statements regarding Ennahda’s tenth congress—indicating that Ennahda completely severed the relationship between religion and politics, or that the phrase “Muslim democrat” represents an about face in how the party already conceived itself—are exactly that: [overblown](#).¹¹ A variety of rationales rooted in Ennahda’s history and promises to strengthen both religious and political life—in conjunction with a long process of debate between and amongst Ennahda’s base and leadership—helped the party support the congress’s changes. In general, nahdawis see these changes not as self-contradictory, or as a tactical form of *taqiyya* (religiously-sanctioned lying), but as consonant with the party’s history and overall approach to Islamism—or, as it would like its critics to see it, Muslim democracy.¹²

In closing, the “Tunisianness” or “Tunisification” of Ennahda’s trajectory should be of great interest to scholars. How did the influence of both traditional and reformist Zaytouna thinkers, including Tahar Ben Achour, shape Ennahda’s early *halaqat* (religious discussion circles) and philosophical orientation? Which nahdawis first sought to rehabilitate more controversial reformist thinkers like famed Tunisian women’s rights advocate Tahar Hadad, when, and why? How exactly did Ennahda come to acquire the reputation—shared amongst many of its secularly oriented domestic

¹⁰ Ounissi, 2016.

¹¹ Monica Marks, “How big were the changes Ennahda just made at its national congress?”, in *Monkey Cage, The Washington Post*, May 25th, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/05/25/how-big-were-the-changes-made-at-tunisia-ennahda-just-made-at-its-national-congress/>. For a flavor of this coverage see CNN, “Ghannouchi: Tunisia ready to separate religion, politics,” May 23rd, 2015, <http://edition.cnn.com/videos/tv/2016/05/23/intv-amanpour-rached-ghannouchi-tunisia-ennahda-islam.cnn>

¹² “Taqiyya” refers to the legality of denying one’s Islamic faith in dangerous situations. Some critics of Ennahda whom I have interviewed accuse the party of playing down its Islamism as a form of tactical “taqiyya,” i.e. a means to negotiate through a tricky political situation rather than a genuine philosophical progression.

critics—of being a non-Tunisian movement oriented to the Muslim Brotherhood or, even more radically, to the rigidity of Gulf Wahhabism, and how much of that reputation was fairly earned? How do we reconcile such critiques with the reality that Ennahda boasts the broadest and deepest core constituency of any political party in Tunisia? Each of these questions would make the topic of an excellent thesis, and represent precisely the sorts of questions that historians interested in Tunisian Islamism, or in what we might call the “nationalization” of Islamist movements more broadly, should be asking.

Ennahda’s 10th congress and Ounissi’s contribution to this project, which presaged it, offer fascinating windows into a moment of party normalization and nationalization—snapshots that importantly illuminate, too, the ways Islamist movements, and confessional and/or ostracized movements more broadly, seek to build legitimacy and cultivate trust in transitioning democracies.

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