Ennahda from within: Islamists or "Muslim Democrats"?

ISLAMISTS ON ISLAMISM TODAY

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Editor's note: "Islamists on Islamism Today" is a new series within Brookings's [Rethinking Political Islam](#) project. In this series, we will hear directly from Islamist activists and leaders themselves, as they engage in debate with project authors and offer their own perspectives on the future of their movements. Islamists will have the opportunity to disagree (or agree) and challenge the assumptions and arguments of some of the leading scholars of political Islam, in the spirit of constructive dialogue.

As an Ennahda member of the parliament in Tunisia, I've always been interested in how we're portrayed both by the academics who study us as well as the media. I've often felt a strong discrepancy between what we would read about ourselves, as an Islamist party, and who and what we actually are.

In this piece, I would like to address some of the issues raised by [Monica Marks](#)[1], [Avi Spiegel](#)[2], and [Steven Brooke](#)[3] in their contributions to Brookings' [Rethinking Political Islam](#) initiative. First is the very identity of Ennahda and why it is important to further

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[1] Monica Marks, "Tunisia's Ennahda: Rethinking Islamism in the context of ISIS and the Egyptian coup," Brookings Institution, August 2015. http://www.brookings.edu/~/media/Research/Files/Reports/2015/07/rethinking-political-islam/Tunisia_Marks-FINALE.pdf?la=en.

[2] Avi Spiegel, "Succeeding by surviving: Examining the durability of political Islam in Morocco," Brookings Institution, August 2015. http://www.brookings.edu/research/reports2/2015/08/~/media/A02C6E64675D44E3BAF9BA97E3D19DF7.ashx

[3] Steven Brooke, "The Muslim Brotherhood's Social Outreach after the Egyptian Coup," Brookings Institution, August 2015. http://www.brookings.edu/~/media/Research/Files/Reports/2015/07/rethinking-political-islam/Egypt_Brooke-FINALE.pdf?la=en .

discuss the supposed Muslim Brotherhood paternity of our movement. Second, I focus on what the failure of the "legalist" approach means for the next generation of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, and its consequences for the rest of the Arab world. This will also be an occasion to reinterpret the real impact of the Egyptian coup of July 3, 2013 on the Tunisian transition. The last section rethinks how we label a party like Ennahda, and asks whether "Muslim Democrat" might be a more accurate description of the party's orientation, rather than the traditional designation of "Islamist."

Ennahda: the Tunisian Muslim Brotherhood or Bourguiba's illegitimate child?

I think that it is time to recognize that the traditional approach which links all contemporary Islamic values-based political parties to the Muslim Brotherhood as a sort of "parent company" has reached its limits, especially in light of recent decisions taken by these parties. The founding context of Ennahda is more complex than a tentative of importation of Hassan El Banna's ideology into Tunisia by Rached Ghannouchi. The very nationally grounded trajectory of the founders of the Islamic Tendency Movement (which later became Ennahda) says a lot about the local characteristics of the Tunisian Islamic movement.

Much can be gleaned in this regard by examining the intellectual and religious origins of Tunisia's Islamic movement. For instance, the two main founders of Ennahda, Abdelfattah Mourou and Rached Ghannouchi, were both graduates of Zaytouna University, the first Islamic university in the Arab world. Founded in 737, it gained a reputation for being responsive to the changing needs of society. Understanding this is significant, as Abdelfattah Mourou's spiritual father is Sheikh Hmed Ben Miled, a Zaytunite, rather than Sayyid Qutb as many may erroneously assume. Ben Miled played a key role in Tunisia's national liberation movement. He was heavily engaged in the struggle for the modern Tunisian state and a supporter of the state institutions that formed its bedrock. There is a famous picture of Miled with a group of scholars from Zaytouna in front of the Parliamentary building, taking part in legislative consultations during Bourguiba's regime.

In the movement's early years, Ennahda's religious circles were oriented towards Sheikh Tahar Ben Achour's teaching and legal judgements. A president of Zaytouna University and adherent of the Maliki school of jurisprudence, Ben Achour was one of the modern fathers of a more rationalist approach towards Quran exegesis (*tafsir*) which emphasized the importance of *maqasid al-sharia,* in other words the objectives or ends, rather than the means, of Islamic law. An arch-enemy of the traditionalists, he was pushed out of the university in 1960.

Many Ennahda leaders, such as Rached Ghannouchi himself, also participated in the rehabilitation of the controversial scholar Tahar Haddad against traditionalist pushback to his ideas. Haddad wrote against the more conservative scholarly wings of Zaytouna in his book *Women in Shari'a and Society*. He also held politically progressive positions on trade unions and social welfare. These are just some of the figures who shaped a distinctly Tunisian progressive and rationalist approach towards sacred texts, providing fertile ground for Habib Bourguiba to proceed with the modernization of state law, especially with regards to social and personal statutes.

My aim here is not to deny the influence of thinkers whose ideas traveled beyond their borders, such as those of Hassan al-Banna, or of the supranational fora where Islamist parties gather, debate, and exchange ideas, but rather to note that the impact of such factors is not as decisive as one might think. That said, they were certainly important at the intellectual level, and the plethora of Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood publications were the main philosophical "food for thought" of the Tunisian movement, which subsequently carved re-interpreted that literature in the context of its own unique, local ideological environment.

It is my belief that the "Grand Soir" of Islamist movements is more a post-hoc construct rather than a real (and realizable) objective of political actors who have, in reality, showed much more pragmatism than originally prophesized. One could even go so far as to say that Ennahda's founding generation were the illegitimate children of Bourguiba, insofar as they subscribed to the idea of a struggle for national independence, the necessity of a social renaissance, and the importance of modern governance tools.

As Monica Marks notes in her working paper, "[Tunisia's Ennahda: Rethinking Islamism in the context of ISIS and the Egyptian coup](#)," Ennahda members consider themselves different from the Muslim Brotherhood both at the ideological and political level.[4] Despite this, after the 2011 revolution, there is still the tendency among a range of analysts to consider Ennahda as simply the Tunisian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. This has led to a misinterpretation of the path the party has taken since 2011. Furthermore, in Ennahda's case, being able to experiment with four years of actual political governance has had more impact on its identity and political discourse than decades of underground activity.

The approach and objective of integrating within the State is to secure the presence of the party not only as a legal, "normal" entity but also as a legitimate political force able to both design public policies and to implement them. To change things from outside of

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[4] Monica Marks, "Tunisia's Ennahda: Rethinking Islamism in the context of ISIS and the Egyptian coup," Brookings Institution, August 2015. http://www.brookings.edu/~/media/Research/Files/Reports/2015/07/rethinking-political-islam/Tunisia_Marks-FINALE.pdf?la=en.

the system, has been an illusion that most political parties, Islamist or otherwise, no longer believe in. The process of ownership is long and necessary. As for Ennahda, this process began in 2011 with the party's legalization and its first experience in leading a coalition government with two secular parties.

Many Islamist political parties (like in the Morroccan PJD case) are setting up a range of new activities and strategies, demonstrating the sort of long-term vision these political formations want to develop, far from the unpredictable counter-reaction of a system in transition.

During Brookings' US-Islamic World Forum in Doha in June 2015, we had the opportunity to discuss and debate with other young Islamist activists from across the Middle East (Egypt, Morocco, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Jordan), whether in power or in the opposition.[5] It brought out the local nuances of positions and plans in each country. Even if we aren't always looking for examples to follow from outside our own national contexts, other models can be instructive as counter-examples, signposts to avoid pitfalls. But some of these experiences can also inspire. For example, Ennahda, the Turkish Justice and Development Party (AKP), and the Moroccan Justice and Development Party (PJD) have accumulated significant experience in successful state-driven economic development.

I always find myself surprised when analysts express surprise at the pragmatism of these parties. There seems to be an implicit expectation that these groups will behave like secretive and archaic religious brotherhoods, even then the entire expressed purpose of these groups is to govern and to participate in the shaping of public policy. For example, Ennahda's *tazkiya* process (whereby which party members "vouch" for prospective applicants) has been more or less transformed into a simple non-binding recommendation. Many other "management"-type strategies are being modernized as the separation process between the party (*hizb*) and the movement (*haraka*) progresses.

It is time to look deeper at the professionalization of political parties in the Middle East, especially those in transitional countries like Tunisia. Within Ennahda, we consider the debates about the identity of the State, society's national project, and the relationship between religion and politics (including the place of sharia in the hierarchy of norms) to have been resolved during the constitutional process of 2011-2014. The resulting constitution, one which Tunisians are quite proud of, is a text which is unlikely to be significantly amended anytime soon, especially after four years of charged and thorough debate around the document's provisions. In fact, political parties who were still campaigning on these potentially divisive topics during the 2014 parliamentary

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[5] "The Arab uprisings and the next generation of Islamists," Brookings Institution, June 2015.
http://www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2015/06/next-generation-islamists.

elections were roundly defeated. Even Hamma Hammami, the candidate from the far-left party, the Popular Front, found it necessary to reassure voters that he was Muslim and that he loved the Prophet Mohamed during a television interview without even having been asked about it. Interestingly, Nidaa Tounes – a party defined by its anti-Islamism – relied heavily on religious rhetoric during the parliamentary and presidential campaign despite its "secular" label. I remember one of their young members, after a political appearing in a debate with us on France 24, telling me that French journalists should stop calling them "laique" (supporting the separation of religion from politics) because they are not and do not want to be seen as such by Tunisians.[6]

The maturity of parties like Ennahda is also apparent through the sorts of subjects they raise in public debate. It's no longer a matter of the relationship between Islam and state anymore, or traditionally "Islamic" issues, but rather a commitment to finding solutions to corruption, economic development, social issues, and human rights.

The failure of the "legalist" approach and the consequences the Egyptian coup had in Tunisia

The failure of the legalist approach of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood has had a significant impact on the way a young generation of Arabs, regardless of their political preferences, see institutions and political systems. For the Islamists among them, it seemed that despite their efforts to understand and play by the rules, they would never be accepted. Decisive results at the ballot box could be contested. Elections were not a genuine means to access power. Moreover, the brutality of military repression is heightening feelings of defiance among Islamists toward the state and its institutions. More than a military coup, the events in Egypt represent a major missed opportunity to reconcile a whole generation with the state.

The risk of violent reaction from the younger generation cannot be dismissed, though it is worth noting that, since the coup, the pro-Brotherhood student organizations that are still demonstrating against military oppression have been careful not to fall into the trap of using violence. That said, there is a correlation between the military coup and subsequent crackdown and the rise of ISIS and other extremist groups in Egypt. Violence begets violence, and this infernal cycle is nourished by dictatorship, whether based on military power, secular ideology, or Islamic rhetoric. We shouldn't be surprised by the loss of credibility of much vaunted "universal values," which weren't strong enough to protect democratic transitions, human rights, and individual liberties

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[6] "Tunisie : quels sont les défis qui attendent le nouveau pouvoir ? [Tunisia: What are the challenges facing the new government?]," France 24. October 28 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M0CYOnO34LU

in much of the Arab world. This failure has led to a loss of faith in democracy as the way to manage a society or as a good system for power sharing.

We usually read that the Egyptian coup essentially induced Ennahda's decision to step down and accept the handing over of power to a technocratic government whose main mission was to organize legislative and presidential elections within a year's time. This has often been interpreted as a surrender on Ennahda's part, with the ouster of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt as a kind of turning point in Ennahda's thought. I think that this view doesn't quite capture the full picture and tends to forget several important things.

Initially, the start of the Tunisian political crisis of summer 2013 wasn't triggered by the coup in Egypt but rather by the assassination of Mohamed Brahmi, a prominent leftist politician. This re-ignited the country's previous crisis of February 2013, following the assassination of the politician Chokri Belaid. Though the Egyptian coup may have accelerated the process and reinforced the demands of the secular opposition, the confrontation inside Tunisia preceded the removal of Mohamed Morsi from power.

But, more generally, we need to go back to the very start of the democratic transition in 2011 to better grasp how events unfolded. Consider, for example, the attitude of Ennahda since the October 2011 elections, after which the party decided not to govern alone and to instead share power with two very ideologically different parties, the secular nationalist Congress for the Republic (CPR) and the socialist Ettakatol. I consider this a continuation of a process which started in 2005 with the 18th of October Collectif, when various parties from the opposition to President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali decided to launch an inclusive dialogue process to reach consensus on fundamental issues.

The conclusions of these discussions were published in a book, which summarized areas of agreement on core concerns, such as the civil character of the State, the nature of the regime, the importance of civil liberties, and women's rights.[7] In other words, sharing power and prioritizing dialogue over exclusivism was part of Ennahda's philosophy well before the Egyptian coup and even the uprisings of 2011.

Since the start of the democratic transition, it was not unusual to hear Rached Ghannouchi speaking about the importance of making the process as inclusive as possible, regardless of the political weight of the various parties. This, he argued, was the best way to secure the transition. A desire to minimize political resistance to democratization by inviting the maximum number of political actors to participate

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[7] "Notre voie vers la démocratie [Our path to democracy]," Collectif 18 octobre pour les droits et des libertés en Tunisie [The 18 October Coalition for Rights and Freedoms in Tunisia], June 15, 2010, https://goo.gl/nPTn8s

reflects a clear commitment on the part of Ennahda leaders. Political inclusion is highly valued by Ghannouchi and party leaders as a tool to reinforce democratic institutions. The polarizing nature of the lustration debate in 2013 – over whether or not to bar old regime figures from electoral participation – led us to further conclude that exclusion couldn't be the solution if we wanted to sustain the health and stability of the transitional process. The Libyan and the Iraqi experiences of lustration played an important role as counter-examples, helping to convince Ennahda parliamentarians to vote against the proposed electoral exclusion law to avoid a similar scenario. Given all of this, it shouldn't be surprising to see Ennahda calling for unity and inclusion. As the head of a list of candidates in the parliamentary elections, I campaigned on national unity, defending the proposal for a national coalition government. To be sure, it required considerable time and effort to explain to voters the necessity of bringing in as many political forces as possible to support vital economic and social reforms. It's not necessarily easy to campaign for the benefits of a complex and unusual political balance.

These positions were taken in consultation with Ennahda's Shura Council after an intense internal debate. The negative path taken by the Libyan revolution, the deteriorating situation in Iraq, and the internecine conflict in Syria ended up convincing the majority of Tunisians that lustration isn't always a solution to political crises, such as the one we were facing at the time.

Another thing to keep in mind is that the major threat before Ennahda at the time was the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly and the exclusion of the party from the constitutional debate. Irrespective of anything else, this could have derailed the entire democratic process. Ennahda, however, managed to secure the constitutional process by ensuring that the constitution was finalized under the Ennahda-led government of Ali La'arayedh before handing over power to a temporary technocratic government. This achievement is viewed by Ennahda as a success. The Egyptian scenario played the role of an *a posteriori* counter-example in forming legitimate Ennahda decisions.

The meaning of being a Muslim-Democrat political party in the 21st century

When Rached Ghannouchi first used this term, it was an effort to help the media understand the pitfalls of instantly and unanimously labeling diverse political actors as Islamists, despite their differences. Highlighting the parallel with Christian-Democratic European parties, like Germany's Christian Democratic Union (CDU), seemed to be the easiest way to signify Ennahda as a political party bringing together both democratic principles and religious values.

Many, both inside and outside of Ennahda, were initially surprised by this new label and began to wonder what changes, if any, it implied at the political level. The fact is we can

no longer use a term so charged with negative connotations when describing what we consider to be one of the most positive phenomena taking place in the Muslim World today. For the vast majority of Muslims, ISIS and its ilk are those who misinterpret and abuse Islam and use religion as a marketing tool for unspeakable, inhumane acts and for a brutal war for territory with no end. We believe we have a critical role to play in countering ISIS. The Islamic scholars which Ennahda members consider as references are serious and legitimate sources of religious interpretation when it comes to positions on violence, barbarity, the modern state, civil liberties, and the objectives (*maqasid)* of sharia.

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. No one, for instance, would seriously link the French socialist president François Hollande with Georges Cirprani, the historical leader of the terrorist group Action Directe, despite both of them hailing from political groups which claim inspiration from the same ideology. We unfortunately are not afforded the same treatment, and must therefore make our differences with ISIS and other extremists clear to all.

In a nutshell, Muslim-Democrat is the most accurate term to describe what Ennahda is trying to accomplish since the beginning: reconciling Islam and democracy in the Arab world.

About this Series:

The *Rethinking Political Islam* series is an innovative effort to understand how the developments following the Arab uprisings have shaped—and in some cases altered—the strategies, agendas, and self-conceptions of Islamist movements throughout the Muslim world. The project engages scholars of political Islam through in-depth research and dialogue to provide a systematic, cross-country comparison of the trajectory of political Islam in 12 key countries: Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Syria, Jordan, Libya, Pakistan, as well as Malaysia and Indonesia.

This is accomplished through four stages:

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- **Reaction essays** in which authors reflect on and respond to the other country cases.

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