

Hudson Institute

AUGUST 2017 / BRIEFING PAPER

# A New U.S. Strategy to Bolster Tunisia's Struggling Democracy

ERIC BROWN AND SAMUEL TADROS



© 2017 Hudson Institute, Inc. All rights reserved.

For more information about obtaining additional copies of this or other Hudson Institute publications, please visit Hudson's website, [www.hudson.org](http://www.hudson.org).

#### **ABOUT HUDSON INSTITUTE**

Hudson Institute is a research organization promoting American leadership and global engagement for a secure, free, and prosperous future.

Founded in 1961 by strategist Herman Kahn, Hudson Institute challenges conventional thinking and helps manage strategic transitions to the future through interdisciplinary studies in defense, international relations, economics, health care, technology, culture, and law.

Hudson seeks to guide public policy makers and global leaders in government and business through a vigorous program of publications, conferences, policy briefings and recommendations.

Visit [www.hudson.org](http://www.hudson.org) for more information.

#### **Hudson Institute**

1201 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.  
Suite 400  
Washington, D.C. 20004

P: 202.974.2400  
[info@hudson.org](mailto:info@hudson.org)  
[www.hudson.org](http://www.hudson.org)

Cover: photograph of a super moon over the Medina of Tunis

Photo Credit: user: IssamBarhoumi, Wikimedia Commons/Public Domain, CC BY-SA 4.0

Hudson Institute

AUGUST 2017 / BRIEFING PAPER

# A New U.S. Strategy to Bolster Tunisia's Struggling Democracy

ERIC BROWN AND SAMUEL TADROS



## ABOUT THE REPORT

The following brief on Tunisia is part of a series of occasional papers that assess the challenges and opportunities facing governments across North Africa and the Middle East. Specifically, these reports focus on those polities where political stability is increasingly threatened but, under the right conditions, also hold the potential to become long-term U.S. allies. The analysis and recommendations contained in each brief are largely drawn from field research conducted by the authors and interviews with the respective polity's political and military leaders, religious and secular actors, and academic community, among others. The authors' goal has been to assess the political conditions in these countries, map U.S. competitors, and look for opportunities for U.S. diplomatic and political strategy to advance stability, prosperity, and U.S. alliance-building.

The authors are grateful for the superb work of Hudson interns Justin Smith, Connor Hirsch and Kevin Truitte, who provided valuable research assistance for this paper.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. Background	4
Executive Summary	4
Key Recommendations for U.S. Policymakers	5
Introduction	7
The New Republic and Its Discontents	9
“The Dark Regions”	14
The Future is Failing	16
Temptations of the Caliphate	18
Foreign Influences	20
II. Opportunities and Strategies	23
Bilateral Economic Compact	25
Anti-Corruption and Economic Sovereignty	27
Political and Civil Society Assistance	29
Ennahda	30
The Children of Bourguiba	32
Support for a Contest of Ideas	34
Education	35
Political Opportunities in the Security Sector	37
Political Sovereignty and Domestic Religious Affairs	39
III. Author Biographies	41

# I. BACKGROUND

## Executive Summary

The country that set off the Arab Spring of 2011 is now widely hailed as its only success story. However, the factors that have aided the formation of the post-2011 Tunisian Republic cannot be counted on to sustain it. The country's ongoing transition is, in fact, deeply contested by forces both inside and outside the nation. Despite significant aid from the U.S. and other Western countries, Tunisia remains beset with tremendous security, governance, and economic challenges. Moreover, Tunisia's enemies like Islamic State and others are seeking to further splinter the republic along numerous societal fault lines to advance their own interests.

The U.S. has a long-range strategic interest in seeing Tunisia emerge as a self-sustaining democracy that can contribute to solving the larger crisis of governance and

republicanism in the Arabic-speaking world. No program of aid is likely to succeed if the U.S. does not ground it in a diplomatic and political strategy for standing up the Tunisian Republic against its enemies.

A rethink of how the U.S. aids Tunisian democracy is needed. Instead of doubling down on existing capacity-building programs, more emphasis needs to be placed on the ideological and political contest between the post-2011 republic and its discontents. This requires local knowledge and careful analysis of opportunities. Building governing capacity is necessary, but the locus of the political contest now is the struggle inside and between the main religious and secularist factions which is hindering the formation of a new national compact.

# Key Recommendations for U.S. Policymakers:

## **CIVIL/RELIGIOUS**

**In addition to party-training assistance, U.S. democracy aid should be repurposed to stimulate a real competition of ideas on state reform at Tunisia's various think tanks and academic centers and among, and within, the political parties.**

**One focus should be on working directly with parliament.** The U.S. should aim to reduce the distrust between parties, and to give enlightened leaders on all sides the support they need to work for the good of the Tunisian Republic, rather than for factional interests and for foreign powers.

**Focus more resources on cultivating essential personal links with emerging leaders in government, business, and civil society.** At the government level, this would consist of issue-based joint conferences and workshops and legislative staff exchanges to promote good governance. Opportunities for nongovernmental cooperation include establishing partnerships between each country's labor unions, industries, trade groups, religious networks, and media.

**Outreach to Ennahda and support for its ongoing transformation from an Islamist movement into a Muslim Democratic party must be a key long-range U.S. priority.** The U.S. must therefore use the opportunities it now has to cultivate the up-and-coming generation, to strengthen the democratic and pluralist tendencies in Ennahda, and try to institutionalize them.

**Likewise, the U.S. must not neglect Tunisia's diverse secular actors, especially those which share our basic republican principles.** The U.S. should work directly with

Nidaa Tounes to encourage internal democratic processes and honor its achievements and efforts to establish a civil democracy. The continuation of this and the evolution of secularist politics is as crucial to Tunisian democracy as the evolution of Ennahda.

**In addition to assisting Tunisian personnel for a ground game to proactively contest radical ideology, the U.S. should support Tunisians by connecting religious reformers with their counterparts elsewhere in the region, especially in Morocco.**

**While the immediate focus should be on the practical, reform of civic education is also desperately needed.** The benefits of modern education need to be extended to all Tunisians, including those in the southern provinces. In part, this calls for capacity-building, and this can be done through direct assistance to the educational sector, but more crucially, through organizing and empowering reformers to do this themselves.

**The U.S. should work with various parties in key areas on repairing the relationship between religion and political authority.** Tunisia will need an alternative to the broken laicist tradition of the Bourguibist era, one that allows religious actors some latitude in the political sphere while requiring their moderation. This is critical for fostering reconciliation and for ensuring that religious groups remain committed to the civic state.

**In addition to reforming police education, a political strategy needs to be implemented to penalize police abuse and corruption and improve the public's confidence in the police and demonstrate that reform is happening.**

**The U.S. should seek to expand current collaborative worker-training programs, administered through USAID, and help forge greater public-private cooperation while empowering private organizations to carry educational reform forward.**

**Reform should promote English language education both through the official educational system and through outside sources such as AMIDEAST.** Such programs are necessary to attract greater multi-national investment, just as they are critical for opening Tunisia to international academic exchange, politics and commerce.

## **ECONOMIC**

**Support Tunisian initiatives to fight anti-corruption and create a new economic culture.** Tunisian Prime Minister Youssef Chahed has called for a “total war against corruption.” The U.S. should provide technical, analytical and political support to the Tunisian government and NGO anti-corruption efforts. This could take the form of a coordinated campaign with government, media, and partners from other sectors who recognize that corruption is a national security issue that undermines the republican government.

**All direct U.S. economic aid programs, whether the aim is to foster micro-finance or entrepreneurship, should be designed and evaluated in light of the political goal of reducing the harmful propensity for “machine politics.”**

**Critical to the country’s economic vitality is developing an entrepreneurial culture which encourages young Tunisians to create their own business opportunities.**

**Conclude a full bilateral trade agreement.**

**Build on programs begun under President Obama, including an entrepreneurship fund that provides start-up capital to young Tunisian entrepreneurs.** The Tunisian American Enterprise Fund (TAEF), administered by USAID, plans to invest \$100 million in diverse industries and across geographic regions within Tunisia over a ten-year period ending in 2027.

**Establishing an independent and transparent philanthropic sector through legal reform is a vital first step. The U.S. economic strategy needs to combine with and reinforce new opportunities for fostering reform of Tunisia’s political economy.** In conjunction with civil society and independent media organizations, it is important to establish a public, fact-based source of information about what foreign funds are coming into the country and to what parties they are going.

**With over one million Tunisians living abroad, the U.S. needs to develop an outreach program to empower these communities to help their native land.**

## **MILITARY**

**The Tunisian military’s enhanced reputation should be utilized as a vehicle for national integration by opening up opportunities to Tunisians from the country’s neglected southern areas.**

**The U.S. could also offer more opportunities for Tunisian officers to study at U.S. military schools, but more importantly, a formal and comprehensive effort to reform officer training inside Tunisia is needed.** For this, officer education needs to emphasize not just complex military operations in urban environments and the interior regions, but also rule of law and tactical economics.

# Introduction

The country that set off the Arab Spring of 2011 is now widely seen as its only success story. The dismal situation across the Middle East makes Tunisia's efforts to form itself into a democratic republic all the more impressive and even heroic. In the months after the 2011 revolution, constitutional struggles between secularists and Islamists spilled into the streets, while violent clashes and the assassinations of two prominent secularist politicians by Salafi extremists nearly broke the country. Yet it pulled together and managed to avoid a further descent into chaos. Not only did Ennahda, the Islamist-rooted party which led the government from 2011–2013, peacefully cede power in 2014, but in subsequent presidential and parliamentary elections all major political parties came to be represented in government. The 2015 Nobel Peace Prize award to the quartet of civic groups that pressured feuding politicians to reconcile for the sake of the country was fitting recognition of the republican spirit shared by many of Tunisia's citizens.

As the only Arabic-speaking country with a chance of becoming a viable democracy anytime soon, the outcome of Tunisia's ongoing transition has potentially far-reaching consequences. With Middle Eastern autocrats pointing to chaos, civil war, and misery as examples of what happens when populations reject dictatorship, Tunisia can show that a better way is possible. Indeed, the establishment of a constitutional and pluralistic republic in Tunisia could inspire regional political life and provide a model to republicans in other parts of the Middle East. As the popular saying in Egypt and elsewhere goes, "Tunisia is the Answer."

**AS THE ONLY ARABIC-SPEAKING COUNTRY WITH A CHANCE OF BECOMING A VIABLE DEMOCRACY ANYTIME SOON, THE OUTCOME OF TUNISIA'S ONGOING TRANSITION HAS POTENTIALLY FAR-REACHING CONSEQUENCES.**

In their attempts to explain why Tunisia has fared better than other countries that have been wracked by the ongoing post-2011 convulsion, experts have compiled a long list of factors. The country has a large and well-educated middle class, and the relative homogeneity of Tunisian society has helped spare it from the ethno-sectarian strife that has shattered other societies. Tunisian Muslims also have a proud history of defending their indigenous religious ideas and practices against Wahhabi encroachment since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and established Islamic scholars see their nation's current fight with Islamic State and other forms of jihadism as a continuation of this centuries-long struggle. The republic is also part of a larger Mediterranean history, with its citizens looking to the pre-Islamic past of Carthage as well as to modern Europe and France, and to the struggle for national independence and for equal standing with their former colonial rulers. Tunisia thus has a "useable past" which distinguishes it as a nation from its neighbors and gives its citizens a relatively coherent basis on which to build.

## **THE REPUBLIC IS BESET WITH ENORMOUS SECURITY, GOVERNANCE AND ECONOMIC CHALLENGES, AND TUNISIA'S ENEMIES ARE HOMING IN ON THESE STRUCTURAL WEAKNESSES.**

Modern Tunisia's founding father, Habib Bourguiba, was an authoritarian who put in place a highly-centralized state that zealously guarded its power and imprisoned its opponents. Yet the founding generation also left behind a tradition of proto-republican governance supported by a secular administrative apparatus and a program of civic education. The institutionalized empowerment of women is a source of national pride, which has also acted as a check on retrograde politics. Moreover, among the main parties and across the ideological spectrum, there is a relative balance of weakness that, so far, has made a power grab by any one group impractical and kept a check on authoritarian backsliding.

All these factors have aided the formation of the post-2011 Tunisian Republic, but they cannot be counted on to sustain it. The country's ongoing transition is, in fact, deeply contested by forces both internal and external to it. The republic is beset with enormous security, governance and economic challenges, and Tunisia's enemies are homing in on these structural flaws and weaknesses. The country is besieged by Islamic State, and given the chaos in Libya and the general brittleness of the state-based order across northern Africa, including next door in Algeria, these pressures now seem likely to grow. Meanwhile, a new post-2011 national compact for dealing with these urgent issues has been elusive. The core challenges are political and psychological. Deep divides in Tunisian society—between Islamists, religious conservatives and secularists, between the hinterland and the coast, and between the young and the old—intermingle with and reinforce one another, and they are causing political deadlock and complicating efforts to push through the structural reforms and establish the democratic norms the republic needs to put itself on a more secure footing. There is widespread consensus that democracy is the best way forward for the country. The future, however, is probably the easier part; it is dealing with the past and the legacy of Ben Ali that is proving most difficult.

# The New Republic and its Discontents

Zine El Abidine Ben Ali was the quintessential Arab strongman who for twenty-three years kept Tunisia off the world's radar. By keeping up the outward appearance of a modernizing and vibrant society that was open for business and tourism, Ben Ali was left to do as he pleased domestically with virtually no external pressure, aside from the occasional report on human rights abuses. While his bumbling behaviors on the international stage invited comparisons to the feckless bureaucrat Hosni Mubarak, in reality he ruled a police state more like the one in Saddam Hussein's Iraq.

The Ben Ali regime was essentially a mafia enterprise focused on sucking as much wealth as it could from the country. Economic sectors were divided between Ben Ali's relatives and members of his wife's family, the Trabelsis, and they maintained their monopolies by controlling parliament, national economic policy, and the law. While he kept the secularist state created by Habib Bourguiba, Ben Ali's rule was devoid of any real ideological content. Instead, loyalty to the ruling faction was the price for having a piece of its corrupt enterprise, whether one was in international business or dealt regularly with (or sought appointment as) a minor official. The police kept everyone else in line through brutality and fear.

By the 1980s, the modernizing spirit of the Bourguibist era had nearly vanished, and secularist nationalism was turned more and more against the Tunisian people themselves—particularly against the threats, both real and fabricated by the ruling regime, posed by organized religion. Ben Ali used the pretext of a failed coup attempt in 1991 to purge dissenters from the military leadership and outlaw his regime's best-organized political rival, the Ennahda movement, which drew ideological inspiration

from the Iranian Revolution and the Muslim Brotherhood. (Ennahda leaders have denied any involvement in planning violence.) The regime proceeded to crush Ennahda networks and charities, forcing the movement underground or into exile in the West. Civil society, the media, and religious and intellectual life were all strictly proscribed. Ordinary people had little political space of their own and few options but acquiescence to the reigning order or withdrawal into religion, which from the 1990s on came increasingly from the East in the form of puritanical Salafist teachings. Throughout the 2000s, Ben Ali proved a master at playing the Arab dictator's double-game: he tolerated Salafist activism up to a point to contrast his rule with what the regime portrayed as the radical Islamist alternative, and this justified his blanket repression of Ennahda and society in general.

Having come to power through a military coup, Ben Ali also wanted to make sure no one could amass power and follow a similar path to replace him. The ruling faction carefully cultivated divisions within the state to neutralize its rivals. The military was kept weak, and the internal security apparatus was itself broken up into over two dozen smaller agencies, each headed by men who detested one another and vied for favor in the president's court.

This scheme worked for over two decades, until Ben Ali's rapaciousness and the public's despair grew too great and exploded into outrage in 2011. The police state proved brittle and unable to cope with rapidly spreading mass uprisings, Ben Ali fled, and the regime collapsed like a house of cards. What remained, however, was a deeply fragmented society with numerous factions and antagonistic currents that possessed little by way of a

common tradition of politics or unifying sentiment to bind them together. This legacy is still working itself out today.

The post-2011 constitutional crisis revealed a societal split between two broad ideological camps: a secularist one composed of the children of the Bourguibist project, and a deeply religious as well as Islamist one which came to be led by the Ennahda Party. The secularist camp includes members of the Ben Ali regime, but also a substantial middle class of professional and labor groups that sided with the revolution. Despite their differences, this camp sees itself as the republic's rightful leaders and the defenders of the laicist order that was in its original design incompatible with any form of religious-based politics. Meanwhile, Rached Ghannouchi and the upper echelons of Ennahda had strengthened their networks in their years of exile, and after 2011 they returned to their homeland triumphant. Untainted by the ousted regime, the party's rhetoric on economic accountability, justice, and development captured the hopes of many. Yet once in power, Ennahda's immediate focus was not on governance or fixing the economy, but on implementing the ideological agenda that it had long dreamed about. They set out to remake the laicist order, attempting to revise the Personal Status Code (to stipulate that women, as Ennahda parliamentarians put it, were to be considered "complimentary" to men, not their rights-bearing equals) and demanding a central role for Sharia in the new constitution and in political life. This met with a severe backlash from secularists, and the country was plunged into a heated clash over whether the new republic would be a secularist or an Islamic one.

The parliamentary crisis soon spilled into the streets, threatening to shatter prospects for democratic stability. Ennahda officials threw open the gates of Ben Ali's jails

and flooded the country with hardened radicals that fed a new wave of strife and mayhem. In 2011, Salafists attacked the Nessma TV station after it aired a "blasphemous" film. In 2012, radicals stormed Manouba University after the university refused to allow veiled students to take examinations, occupying the office of the dean and replacing the national flag with the black Salafi standard. Violent protests erupted once again outside the American embassy in Tunis in September 2012 due to public anger at a controversial film depicting the Prophet Muhammad in an offensive manner. The October 2012 release of a video recording that showed Ghannouchi urging Salafi leaders to be patient in their demands for implementation of Sharia stoked secularist fears that Ennahda was not committed to civil democracy.<sup>1</sup> In 2013, the assassinations of secularist Jabha Chaabia (Popular Front) politicians Chokri Belaid and Mohamed Brahmi, attributed at the time to Ansar al-Sharia operatives but later claimed by Islamic State, led many Tunisians to believe their country was being sucked into the regional abyss. Meanwhile, jihadists were openly recruiting in Tunis and elsewhere for holy war in Syria and Iraq. At least seven thousand young men left to join Islamic State, making Tunisia, long considered the most modern of Arab nations, the largest supplier of foreign fighters to the metastasizing caliphate movement in the Levant.<sup>2</sup>

Secularists blamed the deteriorating security situation on Ennahda, and popular pressures ultimately drove Ennahda to hand power over to a caretaker government in January 2014. Nidaa Tounes, a new secularist party led by Bourguiba-era cabinet official Caid Essebsi, won elections that Spring and formed a coalition government. Since then, the country has remained on a slow boil, but in the last year and a half, there has also been a

---

1 Tarek Amara, "Tunisia Islamist leader stirs fears of radicalism in video," *Reuters*, October 11, 2012, [uk.reuters.com/article/uk-tunisia-ghannouchi-salafis-idUKBRE89A16G20121011](http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-tunisia-ghannouchi-salafis-idUKBRE89A16G20121011).

2 Geoffrey Macdonald and Luke Waggoner, "Why are so many Tunisians joining the Islamic State?" *Washington Post*, January 27, 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/01/27/why-are-so-many-tunisians-joining-the-islamic-state/?utm\\_term=.f5da388b5599](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/01/27/why-are-so-many-tunisians-joining-the-islamic-state/?utm_term=.f5da388b5599). According to the Washington Post, nearly seven thousand Tunisians have joined the Islamic State in both the Levant and to a lesser extent in Libya.

rapprochement of sorts between the leading factions of the two camps. Against fierce opposition from hardline Bourguibists, President Essebsi has publicly attempted to mend fences with Ghannouchi, and both leaders have since urged their respective parties to reconcile with one another for the sake of the country.

To its credit, Ennahda has also been evolving in important ways. Despite ideological sympathies between a core of Ennahda and the Muslim Brotherhood, the party is itself an amalgamation of disparate elements, with some more Salafist and reactionary and others less focused on doctrinal differences, more emphatically Tunisian, and more pragmatic. Some, particularly those from the younger generation, no longer see themselves as Islamists at all. By ceding power as it did in 2014, Ennahda became the first Islamist party to ever do so peacefully. Ennahda's foes suspect the party might never have stepped down had it been stronger or armed.

Elements inside the party have rejected the decision to give up power, and yet, the party's leaders have since gone several steps further. In 2016, Ghannouchi officially announced plans to "disestablish" the movement he founded by separating its political activities as a party of Muslim democrats from its *da'wa* or religious proselytization activities. This decision was taken for reasons both religious and political, according to Ennahda members. By downplaying ideology and stressing an agenda of economic justice and development, Ennahda hopes to appeal to a wider swathe of Tunisian voters put off by Islamism. Meanwhile, Ghannouchi and others have further argued that Islamism as a political movement is no longer needed, on the grounds that the post-2011 republic can already be deemed an "Islamic state" because it is a

**TODAY, POLLING INDICATES TWO-THIRDS OF TUNISIANS, RELIGIOUS AND SECULAR ALIKE, AGREE DEMOCRACY IS THE RIGHT COURSE FOR THE COUNTRY.<sup>4</sup> EVEN SO, THE DEMOCRATIC CONSENSUS AND EFFORTS TO BRIDGE THE IDEOLOGICAL DIVIDE REST ON SHAKY FOUNDATIONS.**

functioning democracy in which Muslims have an equal and inalienable say in how they are governed. In Tunisian democracy, as Said Ferjani and other thought leaders have argued, "Islamism has ended."<sup>3</sup>

Today, polling indicates two-thirds of Tunisians, religious and secular alike, agree democracy is the right course for the country.<sup>4</sup> Even so, the democratic consensus and efforts to bridge the ideological divide rest on shaky foundations. Right now, it is dependent on a personal understanding between two men, Essebsi and Ghannouchi, both of whom are old and without clear successors. The accord between them is fragile because elements in both their constituencies harbor irreconcilable agendas. Despite the Constitution, there is not yet a tradition of constitutionalism—that is, no real political norms acceptable to all sides that can govern their contest with one another. Moreover, leaders seeking a working

3 Said Ferjani, "The "End of Islamism" and the Future of Tunisia," *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, Volume 20, Hudson Institute, April 29, 2016, <https://www.hudson.org/research/12349-the-end-of-islamism-and-the-future-of-tunisia>.

4 Macdonald and Waggoner, "Why are so many Tunisians joining the Islamic State?"

relationship across the ideological divide still face stiff opposition from within their own parties, which harbor deep-seated fears the opposing side is conspiring to destroy them, sometimes with the help of outside powers. Both camps, in fact, believe the U.S. is backing the other one. These fears are shaping the political calculations of the factions as well as an intensifying rivalry between them.

The secularist camp managed to unify, temporarily, around Essebsi to contest the Ennahda government in 2014, but that unity began to crumble almost as soon as Nidaa Tounes assumed power. Staunch secularists have stalled or broken ranks with Essebsi, refusing to work with Ennahda. They regard Ennahda's turn toward moderation as nothing but a ploy to fool the West into giving them aid while the Islamist movement bides time and builds strength through patronage and ideological recruitment. These secularists insist there is no real ideological difference between Ennahda and hardline Salafists, only a tactical disagreement over the methods to achieve their common goal, an Islamic State dominated by Islamist supremacists. The early Ennahda government's lax policies toward Salafist activism and jihadist recruitment, and the resulting chaos, are too hard to forget. There are lingering fears that Ennahda will once again prove unwilling or unable to provide an alternative to Salafists. For all the talk about Islamism being over, many are convinced Ennahda's long-term goals of transforming society remain intact.

Some secularists will concede that Ennahda's democratic moderation and public-interestedness are genuine, but they are skeptical the party's leadership will be able to convince the rank and file to follow suit. Many of the pragmatists in the party had fled Ben Ali and found refuge in the West, particularly the UK, where they acquired first-hand experience of democratic practices and sensibilities. Yet the majority of the party never had this experience. They lived under Ben Ali's tyranny and still look at politics more as a zero-sum contest, rather than a give-and-take that should

follow established rules and norms. Secularists are especially worried about ties between Ennahda and foreign powers, particularly Qatar and Iran.

The political scene as a whole is extremely fragile. Internally, the secularist camp is in turmoil, with competing wings in a power struggle over who will succeed Essebsi. None of the principal secularist parties that contested the first parliamentary elections are still around today as significant players, with as parties are formed and abandoned as a matter of routine. Their opposition to Islamists helps bring them together, but it is more difficult for secularists to say what they are for, as their broad-based camp encompassing both former regime members and revolutionaries lacks a common governing and economic agenda.

Compared to Nidaa Tounes, Ennahda is better-organized and more cohesive, but not by much. The 75-year old Ghannouchi retains overall command of the movement, but below him divergent political and religious tendencies are vying for position and influence. Ghannouchi has been able to maintain a tenuous balance between hardliners, accommodationists, and democrats within Ennahda, but it is not clear how this balance will be maintained. For many, the movement's purpose is still to defend "Islamic Tunisia" against an alien, imported secularist order. Hardliners grudgingly went along when the party ceded power in 2014, but not out of respect for democratic norms. Rather, they feared that failure to accede to secularist demands would provoke a military coup that Western nations would tacitly support, like the one that toppled Mohammed Morsi's Brotherhood government in Egypt. Indeed, fear of an international conspiracy against them and against "Islam" still affects how some parts of the Ennahda movement think and behave, making it susceptible to demagogic leaders and radicalism. Inoculating the group from extremism will depend on whether the leadership manages to persuade the party's rank and file of the legitimacy and wisdom of their move

to disestablish the movement and bring it permanently into the democratic fold. Of course, this will further depend on whether the secularists themselves can overcome the ideological rigidity and authoritarian impulses of Bourguibist laicism and make room for non-secularists in the new republic.

It would be a tragedy were Tunisian politics to succumb to a hard and fast secularist-religious divide, but forces in both camps say this split is the only one that matters. With each side convinced the other one is playing unfairly, a new national compact has been elusive. This is shaping a maladaptive contest that is causing political paralysis and dysfunction. No state institution is above this conflict. Despite the enlightened leadership of Essebsi, Ghannouchi, and others, it is unclear how the common

## **THE POTENTIAL FOR THE POST-2011 REPUBLIC TO DETERIORATE INTO IDEOLOGICAL EXTREMES AND FACTIONS IS REAL.**

ground needed to nourish the democratic transition will be maintained. A new generation must step up to forge a national compact and show that democratic competition based on agreed-upon rules is necessary and viable, yet both camps now are teetering on the brink of a political crisis. In this, the potential for the post-2011 republic to deteriorate into ideological extremes and factions is real.

# “The Dark Regions”

## THE RELIGIOUS-SECULARIST DIVIDE IN TUNISIAN POLITICS IS NOT ONLY ABOUT IDEAS AND IDENTITY, BUT ENTRENCHED IN THE COUNTRY’S INSTITUTIONAL HISTORY AND GEOGRAPHY.

The religious-secularist divide in Tunisian politics is not only about ideas and identity, but entrenched in the country’s institutional history and geography. There are at least two Tunisiyas: a Mediterranean one located along the urbanized coastal areas, and a more emphatically Islamic and Arab-African one in the interior and southern provinces that is linked culturally and economically to the Sahara as well as to Libya and Algeria. The hinterland has long suffered from political exclusion and economic neglect, and sees the Tunis-based order as existing solely to serve the interests of coastal elites. Meanwhile, along the seaboard, many look to the “dark regions” with deep disdain, seeing them as a place of backwardness, lawlessness, and growing radicalism.<sup>5</sup>

This regional divide was clearly reflected in both the presidential and parliamentary elections. The urbanized coastal areas are secularist strongholds, while a great deal of Ennahda’s support came from the hinterland because of the party’s religious conservatism and

redistributive economic agenda. Overall, the farther one travels, Tunis’s power and sway fades into the hinterland, as does the influence of secularist parties. At the same time, Ennahda’s influence in the South is also contested, in part because of hardline Salafist influence which rejects Ennahda’s pragmatic and conciliatory approach, as well as more general skepticism that any political party will be able to change a republican system that from its creation has been stacked against them.

For centuries, Mediterranean Tunisia was the center of power and commerce, and French colonial policy reinforced this coastal focus, as European administrators lived and prioritized development in the littoral areas. The nation-building program launched by Bourguiba was explicitly modeled on the Kemalist one in Turkey, and the early republic was consciously oriented northward toward Europe. The Bourguibists dismantled the indigenous Sufi religious orders seen as a source of backwardness and installed a secular educational system which undertook in top-down fashion to transform traditional society and create a modern state and citizenry. In African Tunisia, outside of the French-speaking coastal enclaves, the secularist project never stood on firm ground. During the struggle for independence, the southern provinces became the political base of Bourguiba’s greatest competitor, Salah Ben Youssef, and the president never forgave the people who lived in the hinterland for supporting his rival. By the 1970s, however, the national economy was in crisis, and Tunis’s capacity to impose its order and propagate its law in the South rapidly declined, leaving the unfinished republic with a glaring structural

---

<sup>5</sup> For more on this divide, see Amy Hawthorne, “POMED BACKGROUNDER: A TRIP REPORT FROM TUNISIA’S “DARK REGIONS”,” *Project on Middle East Democracy*, December 2015, [www.pomed.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Backgrounder-Hawthorne-Dec-2015.pdf](http://www.pomed.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Backgrounder-Hawthorne-Dec-2015.pdf).

divide. To bring the hinterland to heel, Bourguiba came to rely on a mixture of punitive force and malignant neglect, a tradition which Ben Ali continued.

The disparities today between the two Tunisias are striking. The South suffers from a lack of basic services, including healthcare, water and sewage, as well as education. Infrastructure connecting the interior with the coast is poorly developed, limiting commerce and cultural and civic interaction. Phosphate mines have brought some international presence to the interior, but this business was negotiated with the Ben Ali kleptocracy, and the people have drawn little direct benefit from it. Country-wide, unemployment for those under the age of 35 is as high as 25 percent. In the South, however, youth unemployment approaches a staggering 40 percent.

These dire conditions have been a major factor in the growth of the informal economy, including cross-border smuggling and criminal enterprises. For years, lack of opportunity has also driven a steady internal migration of young people northward looking for a better future. The hinterland, in effect, has come to encircle the cities, and this has placed enormous pressures on an already overstretched welfare state. The rapid growth of the urban poor was one factor which led to the uprisings in 2011. Tensions in coastal cities have also increased as African Tunisia has rubbed with Mediterranean society.

The South has always presented a security challenge to the Tunis-based polity, but the ongoing weakening of the state-based order in North Africa, the warring factions in nearby Libya, and the growth of Islamic State there since 2013 has made securing the hinterland one of Tunisia's most urgent national security challenges. State power has intruded deeper into the South in reaction to the Islamic State threat. The U.S. and other Western partners have

**THE DISPARITIES TODAY BETWEEN THE TWO TUNISIAS ARE STRIKING. THE SOUTH SUFFERS FROM A LACK OF BASIC SERVICES, INCLUDING HEALTHCARE, WATER AND SEWAGE, AS WELL AS EDUCATION. INFRASTRUCTURE CONNECTING THE INTERIOR WITH THE COAST IS POORLY DEVELOPED, LIMITING COMMERCE AND CULTURAL AND CIVIC INTERACTION.**

assisted by deploying military advisors and financing the construction of a wall along the border with Libya to prevent jihadist incursions and disrupt illicit smuggling networks. Tunis has also taken more aggressive security action against suspected militants, ramping up its arrest campaigns and seeking to flush them from their safe havens. However, the security wall has severed communities dependent on cross-border trade with Libya, obstructing their livelihoods without providing an economic alternative. Experts have warned this economic hardship will generate greater opportunity for ISIS to spread, something Tunisian republicans clearly understand.<sup>6</sup> Even so, a clear political and economic strategy for establishing equality of conditions and integrating the peoples of the South into the republic has been lacking.

---

<sup>6</sup> Sarah Yerkes, We need Tunisia in the fight against ISIS, *The Hill*, June 20, 2017, [www.thehill.com/blogs/pundits-blog/international-affairs/338472-we-need-tunisia-in-the-fight-against-isis](http://www.thehill.com/blogs/pundits-blog/international-affairs/338472-we-need-tunisia-in-the-fight-against-isis).

# The Future is Failing

## **POLITICAL POLARIZATION AND THE COASTAL-HINTERLAND RIFT BOTH INTERMINGLE WITH AND REINFORCE YET ANOTHER CORE FAULT LINE IN THE TUNISIAN REPUBLIC, THE ONE BETWEEN THE GENERATIONS.**

Political polarization and the coastal-hinterland rift both intermingle with and reinforce yet another core fault line in the Tunisian Republic, the one between the generations. Over 75 percent of Tunisians are below the age of 35; an estimated 55 percent are not yet 25. It was Ben Ali's failure to make Tunisia a livable place for its burgeoning youth population that ultimately brought his police state to its knees. It was hoped the Jasmine Revolution would usher in a new era of growth and economic justice. Yet since 2011, little progress has been made because of political paralysis and entrenched interests. In many ways, the economic crisis for ordinary people has worsened. The security crisis and ISIS's targeting of tourists has destroyed the tourism industry and deprived the country of a vital source of revenue. Foreign investment has not come, as investors are turned off by the lack of stability and lagging economic reform. Many with the means to do so have already left the country, creating a brain drain that only compounds the current troubles. As one professional in his early thirties told us, "ninety percent" of youth would leave Tunisia tomorrow if given the chance.

The hardest set of challenges involves reforming the kleptocratic system inherited from Ben Ali. Tunisia's heavy regulations and large public sector of the country's existing economic system sustain elites of the older generation who have little personal incentive to reform, but make little room for millions of youths trying to improve their lives. Corruption in business and in government is rampant, and no serious attempt has been made to break the existing monopolies that stifle economic freedom and growth. Instead, a controversial "economic reconciliation law" is seen by one wing of Nidaa Tounes as necessary for a peaceful transition, but secularists and Ennahda voters see it as a bid to protect former regime interests and a betrayal of revolutionary demands for accountability. The most soul-crushing forms of corruption have actually worsened since 2011, as the state has grown more insolvent and as low-ranking officials and street cops increasingly prey on ordinary people for their livelihoods.

Meanwhile, the state continues to be the main driving force in the economy. However, the purpose of the civil bureaucracy was to serve the Ben Ali kleptocracy. Now it is institutionally and culturally ill-equipped to carry out needed structural reforms. Since 2011, politicians and technocratic elites have been struggling to cope with daily crises and short-termism. Mustering the national vision and momentum for deep reform has been made more difficult by powerful labor unions and government employees, who demand higher wages despite the economic crisis. These groups tend to be older, and with less money to go around they are not accepting youths into their ranks. While elected politicians have clashed over identity, they have also been resistant to reform and privatization for fear of jeopardizing their respective voting

bases. Instead, successive governments have started massive public sector hiring programs that have only further stretched the state's financial capacity.

All in all, the situation is unsustainable. International aid has helped to stabilize state budgets and keep the economy afloat. However necessary, critics—both Tunisians, and foreigners—argue current aid programs risk shoring up the existing political economy by creating dependency and disincentivizing desperately needed (albeit painful and unpopular) structural reforms.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, current aid tends to focus on macro-level issues and does little to alleviate the immediate emergency faced by ordinary people. Thus, its effectiveness in addressing the psychological struggle for democracy is limited. Revolutionary hopes and expectations have given way to deepening disillusionment, frustration, and anger over the glacial pace and character of democratic change. According to a 2015 poll by International Republican Institute, 72 percent of the population believes Tunisia is “on the wrong track.”<sup>8</sup> On the streets, there is talk of the need for a new revolution. Some see democracy itself as failing, and there is tangible yearning for a return to authoritarian rule in the hopes it would bring economic relief. As one man in his late twenties put it to us, “if Ben Ali came tomorrow with jobs, he'd be welcomed back.”

With dim employment prospects, even for university graduates, many have started to forego education and self-betterment altogether. The urban poor have turned to illicit networks and crime to make ends meet. Being part of the middle class has become more a curse than a

blessing. Every night, hundreds of thousands of young men sit idly in cafes smoking shisha as they wait for their parents to retire from the public-sector jobs that were promised to them, but which may never materialize. The confluence of the state financial crisis, an already-bloated bureaucracy, and an underdeveloped private sector jeopardize young university graduates' chances of gaining employment commensurate with their education for the foreseeable future.

The crisis has been uniquely hard on young men in this traditional society because, without a job, they are unable to court or marry. On average, Tunisian men do not marry until they have reached their thirties. Unemployment and the lack of affordable housing makes them ineligible for marriage, and many live with their parents well into adulthood. In a society in which being a man means having a family of one's own, this has generated new tensions in everyday family life, particularly between fathers and their grown sons. Should their circumstances improve, many suitors find the eligible women of their generation are already married to men in their forties and fifties.

More and more disaffected youths have renounced modern politics altogether. Despairing men have sought refuge in the utopianism of religious ideology, driving the resurgence of religious radicalism that has wracked Tunisia since 2011. This situation and the seeming impossibility of traditional manhood has left young men with a choice between two paths, both of which have been characterized as “suicidal.” One course involves the harrowing journey across the sea to Europe where they are unwanted, and the second involves joining Islamic State.

---

7 Robert Kubinec, “How foreign aid could hurt Tunisia's transition to democracy,” *The Washington Post*, December 19, 2016, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/12/19/how-foreign-assistance-can-hurt-not-help-tunisia-democratic-transition/?utm\\_term=.48fe8ce7743e](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/12/19/how-foreign-assistance-can-hurt-not-help-tunisia-democratic-transition/?utm_term=.48fe8ce7743e).

8 “Survey of Tunisian Public Opinion: May 30-June 8, 2015,” International Republican Institute, [www.iri.org/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/2015-08-17\\_survey\\_of\\_tunisian\\_public\\_opinion\\_may\\_30-june\\_8\\_2015.pdf](http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/2015-08-17_survey_of_tunisian_public_opinion_may_30-june_8_2015.pdf), pg. 4.

# Temptations of the Caliphate

Republics will not last if they are unable to create a future. In 2016, Moncef Marzouki, Tunisia's first democratically elected president, described the fight with the caliphate movement as an inherently political and ideological one. "Why do we have educated people, people with jobs, who go to ISIS?... It's not the matter of tackling socioeconomic roots. You have to go deeper and understand that these guys have a dream—and we don't. We had a dream—our dream was called the Arab Spring. And our dream is now turning into a nightmare. But the young people need a dream, and the only dream available to them now is the caliphate." As Tunisia struggles to create a compelling future for its youth, the republic has been losing ground to the caliphate and its promises of adventure, authenticity, and honor.

The Islamic State and the idea of a new Tunisian Republic were both born in the upheaval of the Arab Spring and the two have been at war with one another since. From its base of operations in Libya, ISIS has been homing in on the republic's structural divides, attacking its economic and security institutions. ISIS's 2016 assault on Ben Gardane showed that the caliphate movement has been attempting to exploit the widespread grievances and the state's thin presence to create a breakaway emirate in the South.

Tunisians represent the largest bloc of foreign fighters to join the Islamic State, with at least 7,000 traveling to join the group in Iraq, Syria, or Libya. Tunisians have assumed leadership roles in the caliphate movement, especially in the Libyan affiliate. So far, government officials know of at least 800 who have returned to the country, though internal security forces lack the capacity to keep track of all of them. Officials also say they are trying to keep an eye on at least another 15,000 nationals that sympathize with

ISIS and may seek to join it. The caliphate's war on the republic is widely expected to escalate as it loses territory in Syria and Iraq and takes advantage of the security vacuum in Libya and the vast ungoverned "jihadi highway" in the Sahel to extend its reach into the Maghreb. Neither security officials nor ordinary citizens worry their country will be able to handle this, certainly not on their own.

In a country that prides itself as the most modern of Arab nations, the explosion of Salafism in Tunisia has been as vexing as it has been alarming. The caliphate's propagandists have spoken directly to rising public anger with the political parties, with the unreformed police, and with the failures of the revolution. In this, ISIS has a large and growing echo chamber in Tunisia's homegrown Salafi scene. In addition to jihadist groups like Ansar al-Sharia and others that have pledged allegiance to Islamic State, there is a much larger and diverse pool of Madkhali Salafis, so named because they follow the teachings of Saudi scholar Rabee' Ibn Hadi al-Madkhali. In principle, Madkhalis teach submission to authority, no matter how corrupt or illegitimate, and this is one reason Ben Ali's regime gave Salafis room to maneuver even as it repressed Ennahda. While Madkhalis are often described as politically "quietist," this is a misnomer, as they take extreme positions, rejecting modern republican politics as vehemently as many of them condemn the barbarism and un-Islamic character of the Islamic State. Since 2011, Salafist calls to establish their ideal Islamic state (which in many cases differs from the current reality of the Islamic State's administration in Iraq and Syria) have only become stronger as political and economic institutions have broken down and failed to deliver.

**THE ISLAMIC STATE AND THE IDEA OF A NEW TUNISIAN REPUBLIC WERE BOTH BORN IN THE UPHEAVAL OF THE ARAB SPRING AND THE TWO HAVE BEEN AT WAR WITH ONE ANOTHER SINCE. FROM ITS BASE OF OPERATIONS IN LIBYA, ISIS HAS BEEN HOMING IN ON THE REPUBLIC'S STRUCTURAL DIVIDES, ATTACKING ITS ECONOMIC AND SECURITY INSTITUTIONS.**

Tunisia has a long history of defending its indigenous Sufi and pluralistic traditions against the encroachment of puritanical ideologies from the outside. In 1814, Wahhabi scholars sent a letter to religious scholars at Zaytuna mosque, a major center of North African Islam with historical prestige and influence similar to Egypt's al-Azhar. The religious establishment, at the request of Tunisia's ruler Hammuda Bey, rejected Wahhabi calls in the Arabian Peninsula to join the doctrine. Religious Tunisians barely know this history, but those that do see their country's current struggle as a continuation of this, although the Salafi threat now is much greater and the modern republic is less able to cope than Tunisia was in the 18th century.

Since the creation of the Bourguibist state, the social and political influence of indigenous religious institutions has fallen into steady decline. Bourguiba worked to marginalize religious scholars and institutions such as Zaytuna and to subjugate them to political control. Ben Ali continued these policies by persecuting religious dissent and allowing Islamic education to deteriorate. These policies succeeded in degrading the influence of traditional Islam, but they also created a vacuum that alien movements have readily filled. Now, youth are more apt to consult "Shaykh Google" than the staid and what many see as the "compromised" scholars at established religious institutions.

Religious and secularist Tunisians alike want to re-establish political sovereignty over the religious scene, including by revitalizing Zaytuna and other indigenous traditions to offer a national Islamic alternative to the caliphate. This has been a thorny debate, however, and one that the country has just begun. It is reasonable to hope that pragmatic trends within Tunisian Islam could grow stronger and compete more effectively with Salafism and Islamist utopianism, thus helping to integrate Tunisians who are now psychologically detached from the republic into the political process. Ennahda could conceivably play this role, particularly if it manages to persuade its rank and file that Islamism is over and that democratic Tunisia is already an Islamic state; indeed, that Islam requires civil democracy and pluralism. But this will take years to work out. The Ennahda Movement as a whole is still torn between its identity as a Tunisian democratic party and the ideological sympathies of some of its adherents for pan-Islamism. The influence of the latter in Tunisia has only grown since 2011, and this has made it difficult for Tunisians to make the case for the republic and for civil democracy on religious grounds.

# Foreign Influences

**THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN IS NOT CONVENTIONALLY VIEWED AS A PLAYER IN THE MAGHREB, BUT ITS PRESENCE HAS GROWN IN RECENT YEARS DESPITE NATURAL DISADVANTAGES.**

Tunisia has never mattered that much in the larger game of nations, but all this changed with the start of the Arab Spring. Post-revolutionary Tunisia has become a central locus of the broader regional convulsion and unfolding contest between democratic republicanism and conflicting forms of authoritarianism and Islamism. This is extremely dangerous for Tunisia, as the struggle over the next regional order is becoming entangled with the domestic religious and political contest and further complicating Tunisian efforts to form a national compact and put their republic on a more secure footing.

Whereas Western countries have viewed the 2011 uprisings as essentially democratic, Middle Eastern regimes have seen things differently. The Islamist regime in Iran claimed the Arab Spring was an extension of its own 1979 revolution and part of a larger Islamic awakening that would lead to a new regional order dominated by Iran. The ruling AK Party in Turkey, also, wanted to see the Tunisian revolt and the rise of Muslim Brotherhood parties in Tunisia and Egypt as an opportunity to remake the regional order with Turkey as the new hegemon. Meanwhile, the Arab Gulf countries have dramatically expanded their involvement in

Tunisia, attempting to head off both Iranian outreach and each other.

In Tunisia's ongoing struggle to become a republic and master of its own affairs, the two most dangerous contests are the Qatari-Emirati rivalry and the Sunni-Shiite conflict. Qatar positioned itself as a champion of the revolution and in particular of the Ennahda-led government from the outset. By mid-2013 Qatar had committed billions of dollars in investments, provided more than \$1.5 billion in loans, and donated \$20 million to compensate the families of Tunisians killed and wounded during the uprising, while also increasing bilateral military cooperation. The secularist backlash against Ennahda from 2011 onward was also a rebuke of Qatar's perceived influence in Tunisian politics. Meanwhile, the UAE's support for secularist Tunisian factions has been driven mainly by a desire to check Qatar and the spread of the Muslim Brotherhood. Once Nidaa Tounes was in power, the UAE further clarified that the exclusion of Islamists from politics constituted a nonnegotiable requirement for Emirati aid. This was extremely unhelpful for Tunisian republicanism, as it has strengthened the position of recalcitrant Bourguibists against others seeking a third way and hindered reconciliation with pragmatic Islamists. There are signs the Emiratis want to soften their stance toward Ennahda, but so long as its rivalry with Qatar takes precedence over its support for the Tunisian republic, the rivalry between the Gulf sheikdoms will likely continue to harden the religious-secularist divide in Tunisia.

Saudi Arabia has attempted to split the difference between the two smaller Gulf states and to build relations with all Tunisian factions. In keeping with its longtime

support for Ben Ali, Saudi Arabia has hosted him in exile and refused Tunis's extradition requests, angering Tunisians who wish to see him returned and punished. Even so, Tunisian-Saudi relations have continued to evolve both at the governmental and non-official level. Officially, the kingdom has sought simultaneous relations with Nidaa Tounes as well as Ennahda, which it has aimed to cultivate as an intermediary with other Brotherhood movements across the Maghreb. Beyond the political parties, many are alarmed by growing Saudi influence in Tunisia exerted through various religious charities and informal Salafi networks. The full extent of this support is not exactly clear, but it likewise can be expected to grow as a function of the kingdom's rivalry with Iran.

The Islamic Republic of Iran is not conventionally viewed as much of a player in the Maghreb, but its presence has grown significantly in recent years despite many natural disadvantages, including North Africa's small Shia population and strong Arab identity. As is the case in the Levant and Gulf, Iran has masterfully utilized the divisions in Tunisian society to its advantage. It is a testament to Iran's strategic vision and ground game that it has been able to build support across the religious-secularist divide in Tunisia.

Iranian efforts to convert Tunisians to Shiite Islamism date back to 1979. In this, the Islamic Republic benefits from the country's historical connection to religious Shiism in the form of the Fatimid Caliphate, which was established in the country in the tenth century. Iran's religious outreach has resulted in substantial conversion, especially in the city of Gabès. The number of Shia in Tunisia is unknown, with estimates ranging from a few thousand to one hundred thousand. There are several Shia conversion centers in Tunis, as well as a concentrated Iranian pamphleteering effort in the city's neighborhoods. With the Sunni narrative now caught in a stalemate between the twin dead-ends of Islamism and authoritarianism, Iranian political and religious

## **ASSAD REMAINS POPULAR IN TUNISIA, WHERE HE ENJOYS THE SUPPORT OF BOTH ANTI-ISLAMISTS IN GENERAL AS WELL AS ARAB NATIONALISTS, WHO IMPACT THE COUNTRY'S CULTURAL DEBATES.**

discourse is proving attractive because of its populism and general adaptability.

For Islamists, the Islamic Republic of Iran is widely seen as the most successful model of a modern Islamic State, not merely a Shiite one. The Iranian Revolution and its key thinkers from Khomeini to Ali Shariati were highly influential for Ennahda, and the party, next to Hamas, has remained the most pro-Iranian compared with other Islamist movements in the Arab world.

For secularists, Iran is an ally in the war against Sunni jihadism abroad, an ally against Salafis at home, and a nemesis of the ideology they hate most: Wahhabism. Iran has successfully presented itself as a regional bulwark against Islamic State and terrorism. Here, Iran has exploited the general lack of understanding and discussion in Tunisia about the existence of Shia radicalization and the Islamic Republic's subversive and imperialistic ambitions in the Arab East. With Tunisia sending the largest number of foreign fighters to Syria and its internal politics divided between secularists and Islamists, Iran's support for Bashar al-Assad is an asset. Assad remains popular in Tunisia, where he enjoys the support of both anti-Islamists in general as well as Arab nationalists, who continue to have an important impact on the country's cultural debates.

**ONE SENIOR TUNISIAN OFFICIAL  
PREDICTED THAT IRAN WAS SET  
TO BECOME A MAJOR PLAYER IN  
TUNISIAN POLITICS WITH  
ADVERSE CONSEQUENCES FOR  
TUNISIAN DEMOCRACY.**

Iran's ideological outreach has been augmented with commercial and cultural investment. After 2011, visits by Iranian economic officials and trade delegations increased, while Western involvement tapered off because of the worsening security crisis. At a time when Tunisia was suffering from deep economic problems, especially in meeting the demand for oil, Iran was the sole country to offer Tunisia subsidized oil. Similarly, cultural cooperation between both countries was strengthened with the signing of an agreement on cooperation in music and book translation. The Iranian cultural week in Tunisia and

the enormous outreach effort by the Iranian Cultural Center in Tunis, which hosts regular lectures, conferences, and events, are attempts to attract Tunisian intellectuals and the public at-large. Furthermore, Iran has specifically targeted traditional centers of Islamic learning. It has brought Zaytuna professors and members of the official religious establishment back to Iran under the guise of an educational exchange program.

One senior Tunisian official predicted that Iran was set to become a major player in Tunisian politics with adverse consequences for Tunisian democracy. Iranian propagandists are preying on the suspicions and mistrust of the West inside Ennahda and other parts of society. Without contesting this, Tunisian politics could be turned in an emphatically anti-Western direction. The spread of Iranian influence has already been one driver of the post-2011 resurgence of avowedly anti-Shiite Salafism. If Tunisia cannot establish control over its own political and religious affairs, its internal contest could develop a sectarian dimension and render the republic more vulnerable to the wars of the Arab East.

## II. OPPORTUNITIES AND STRATEGIES

Tunisia traditionally played little role in American policy calculations. If anything, Washington saw the country and the Maghreb more generally as a European or mainly French concern (and, as many Tunisians see it, certain interests in France have been all too inclined to treat Tunisia as their own private fiefdom). All this has changed since 2011. With Islamic State's advances across northern Africa, Libya in chaos, and the distinct possibility of turmoil in Algeria, the U.S. needs a stable regional ally to help contain and arrest the deteriorating situation. Over the long term, the U.S. has a vital strategic interest in seeing a self-sustaining Tunisian civil democracy emerge so that it can contribute to solving the larger crisis of governance and republicanism in the Arabic-speaking world.

Western nations have not overlooked Tunisia's significance or its precarious circumstances. The country is now set to become one of the world's largest recipients of foreign aid, and since 2011, scores of experts and consultants have poured into the country to help stabilize it and aid its democratic transition. Large-scale programs focused on economic stabilization, security sector reform, and decentralization of the country's governing arrangements have all been implemented. Moreover, the Obama administration formally designated Tunisia a "non-NATO major ally" in 2015, a move which fast-tracked U.S. military and intelligence cooperation with the country.

This, taken together, has created the basis for a long-term relationship between the world's oldest democracy and the world's newest one. The Tunisian Republic needs Western assistance to continue to fend off Islamic State and other threats and establish deeper roots. In its current form, however, Western aid has been poorly organized and critics charge this is proving counter-productive in

**NO DIPLOMACY OR PROGRAM OF AID IS LIKELY TO SUCCEED IF THE U.S. DOES NOT GROUND IT IN A STRATEGY FOR HELPING TUNISIA DEAL WITH ITS POST-2011 POLITICAL CRISIS.**

some areas, particularly the political economy. A careful, top-down review of U.S. diplomacy and aid programs is needed, with emphasis on their impact on domestic Tunisian politics and the ongoing effort to establish a durable democracy. Isolation served the Ben Ali regime; now, the post-2011 republic desperately needs to break free of this and diversify its foreign relations. Going forward, U.S. coordination with European and Gulf allies like the UAE on a "national action" plan for standing up the Tunisia Republic is desirable, but the country is facing an emergency, and America must lead now without waiting for an international consensus to develop.

No diplomacy or program of aid is likely to succeed if the U.S. does not ground it in a strategy for helping Tunisia deal with its post-2011 political crisis. Now, however, there is growing doubt about what the U.S. wants in Tunisia and the region at large. Psychologically, Tunisia's democratic transition needs anchorage, yet the wild swings of U.S. Middle East policy from Bush's "Freedom Agenda" through Obama's strategic retreat and the current uncertainty of the Trump era have generated deep confusion among

**TODAY, OTHER ACTORS, INCLUDING AMERICA'S ENEMIES, HAVE BEEN STAKING OUT POSITIONS AND ADVANCING THEIR OWN INTERESTS BY BACKING RIVAL FACTIONS AND NETWORKS RATHER THAN SUPPORTING THE REPUBLIC AS A WHOLE.**

Tunisians over where they stand with the U.S. This has not always been the case. Older Tunisians still remember America's defeat of the Nazis and fascists who occupied their country during the Second World War. They also recall the Marshall Plan, which benefited

Tunisia directly because it was considered part of France at the time, and they recall America's subsequent support for their national independence.

Today, other actors, including America's enemies, have been staking out positions and advancing their own interests by backing rival factions and networks rather than supporting the republic as a whole. Even as Western aid and security and technical cooperation increases, the U.S. is practically absent in the deeper political and psychological struggle of establishing a stable democracy. Tunisian officials, religious and civic leaders, military officers, and businessmen expressed a desire for closer relations with the U.S and the creation of a bilateral "strategic compact" between our two democracies. What matters now is not for more large-scale grant-making, but the demonstration of the U.S.'s public stake in Tunisia's long-term success as a free republic.

# Bilateral Economic Compact

A modern republic cannot succeed without a functioning civil economy. Any U.S. diplomatic and political strategy for Tunisia must involve an economic component. By and large, post-2011 economic aid has focused on macro-level issues, but it has neglected the more immediate problems of joblessness and corruption that weaken the republic and create opportunities for ideological factionalism and authoritarian backsliding. Western aid has been insufficiently *political*, and it runs the risk of bolstering the current governing arrangement (even though that is slipping away and on the verge of crisis) without incentivizing it to carry out necessary governmental or economic reforms. To be sure, republican government will not be possible without restructuring the kleptocratic system and culture bequeathed by Ben Ali.

While the U.S. has targeted macro-level reform and touted the virtues of an open economy, other countries have opportunistically pursued their aims by backing their own factions. This reality is having adverse consequences for the formation of a new republican compact. Tunisians are understandably grateful for the support that has poured into their country from wealthy Arab states, but this aid has come with political strings attached. As outside powers have attempted to bolster local actors amenable to their respective political interests, Tunisian efforts to establish sovereignty over their own affairs have suffered.

Tunisia's external trade does not yet supply an alternative to such aid and, in some ways, creates problems of its own. France accounted for 22.5 percent of Tunisia's foreign trade in 2015. Such imbalances reduce healthy and monopoly-breaking competition and reduce

international commerce to a shallow affair that serves entrenched interests on both sides.

The U.S. must be mindful of these realities when designing a strategy to abet the formation of the new republic. Tunisians of varying political backgrounds understand that diversifying their foreign economic relations is vital for establishing a civil economy, and this presents an opportunity for the U.S. No one expects the U.S. to swoop in and create a jobs program, but the U.S. has historically mobilized expertise and used its economic clout to build-up vulnerable countries in which we had a strategic interest, an apt description of Tunisia at present. Establishing a full bilateral trade agreement would open American markets to Tunisian-made goods. At little cost to the U.S., such an agreement would a world of difference to Tunisian industry and the livelihoods of ordinary Tunisians, which is critical to winning the psychological war.

The Trump administration should build on programs begun under Obama, including an entrepreneurship fund providing start-up capital to Tunisian businesses. The Tunisian American Enterprise Fund (TAEF), administered by USAID, plans to invest \$100 million in diverse industries and across geographic regions within Tunisia over a ten-year period ending in 2027. The planned role of the Tunisian state bureaucracy in administering this fund is unclear, but endemic corruption and inefficiency makes the civil bureaucracy an unreliable partner. Instead, the focus of U.S. policy should be on de-risking U.S. private sector involvement in Tunisia and on establishing direct business partnerships between American capital and Tunisian small and medium enterprises.

**TUNISIANS OF VARYING POLITICAL  
BACKGROUNDS UNDERSTAND THAT  
DIVERSIFYING THEIR FOREIGN  
ECONOMIC RELATIONS IS VITAL  
FOR ESTABLISHING A CIVIL  
ECONOMY, AND THIS PRESENTS AN  
OPPORTUNITY FOR THE U.S.**

Opportunities for deepening U.S. commercial engagement in Tunisia are improving. In September 2016, after years of setbacks, the People's Assembly passed a new law on investment which equalized the restrictions applying to both foreign and domestic companies' operations within Tunisia. The new law, which took effect in early 2017, expands protections of foreign investors' possession and intellectual property rights to near-equivalence with their domestic counterparts. These provisions represent an improvement over previous laws which created a restrictive investment environment, especially for foreigners. The Tunisian government reserves the right to limit foreign investors' activities by

requiring government permission for activities in certain critical fields, which must be delineated by law by early 2018. There is support now in parliament and at the municipal level to incentivize long-term investment in infrastructure as well as direct investment in the country's southern provinces. U.S. diplomacy must encourage this, as economic integration between northern and southern Tunisia is vital for the country's reconciliation.

Another area of untapped opportunity lies in the Tunisian diaspora. With over one million Tunisians living abroad, the U.S. needs to develop a comprehensive outreach program to empower these communities to help their native land. The diaspora includes the more than six hundred thousand Tunisians living in France and nearly two hundred thousand in Germany, as well as the smaller but symbolically important communities in America and Canada. Tunisian expatriates have not invested heavily in Tunisia, in large part because of the relative ease and security of investing in their countries of residence. Repatriating even a portion of these funds would be a great benefit to the fledgling republic, and the U.S. should look for ways to make this happen. Enlisting U.S.-based Tunisian organizations to spearhead public-private joint initiatives, business exchanges, and other efforts could be key to unlocking the country's unique economic potential.

# Anti-Corruption and Economic Sovereignty

Robust U.S. economic engagement creates opportunities for promoting anti-corruption and accountability—key revolutionary goals and, most importantly, essential elements for any free republic. Corruption has saturated Tunisian culture and seeps into all levels of society. Official corruption has cost the national economy an estimated \$1 billion or more per year between 2000 and 2008, and post-2011 the government has struggled to gain control of the problem. Ben Ali’s kleptocratic state centralized ownership of key industries within his family and other wealthy, powerful regime allies, enriching a tiny fraction of Tunisians at the expense of everyone else. Elites have benefitted massively from preferential economic treatment that gave them greater access to lucrative opportunities through the state, especially before (and to a lesser extent after) Ben Ali’s fall. Still today, extensive low-level corruption forces Tunisians navigating the bureaucratic state, especially small business owners and aspiring entrepreneurs, to engage in government bribery.

Prime Minister Youssef Chahed has called for a “total war against corruption,” and both the government and Tunisian NGOs are looking for outside support as they seek to transform the republic’s economic life and culture. The Tunisian Anti-Corruption Commission has taken a leading role in this endeavor and needs to be supported. Created after the 2011 revolution and further empowered by its mandate in the 2014 Tunisian Constitution, the commission seeks to expose illegal activity and bring perpetrators to justice. The commission signed an agreement in 2016 to partner with a number of civil society organizations to redress instances of corruption. The Tunisian Association of Public Auditors has also taken an active role in the anti-corruption fight, enlisting its members’ expertise to uncover bribery and conflicts of

**ROBUST U.S. ECONOMIC ENGAGEMENT CREATES OPPORTUNITIES FOR PROMOTING ANTI-CORRUPTION AND ACCOUNTABILITY—KEY REVOLUTIONARY GOALS AND, MOST IMPORTANTLY, ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS FOR ANY FREE REPUBLIC.**

interest. These organizations (and their international partners like Transparency International) could use U.S. analytical, technical, and political support.

It will also be vital to establish greater Tunisian control over their national economic affairs, including through a coordinated public relations campaign with partners in government, media, and other sectors about how economic corruption is undermining the prospects for republican self-government. Intractable corruption is not only contributing to authoritarian backsliding but generating greater opportunities for malign influences to meddle in Tunisian political life. Political dysfunction and factionalism are driven in part by the reality that opposing sides are being backed by external interests with their own political agendas. Tunisia depends on business and philanthropic support from the Gulf, and denouncing this aid is neither possible nor desirable, especially now. At the same time, reducing toxic politics and shoring-up Tunisian sovereignty requires that related international

**ALL U.S. ECONOMIC PROGRAMS, WHETHER THE AIM IS TO FOSTER MICRO-FINANCE OR ENTREPRENEURSHIP, SHOULD BE DESIGNED AND EVALUATED IN LIGHT OF THE POLITICAL GOAL OF REDUCING THE HARMFUL PROPENSITY FOR “MACHINE POLITICS.”**

financial dealings be brought in line with popular demands for accountability and transparency. Within both Ennahda and Nidaa Tounes, there is potential support for a law requiring the full reporting of all business and philanthropic transactions with foreign entities, and the U.S. should seek to build on this.

In addition to working directly with parliament, the NGO I-Watch has also gained a good reputation as an advocate for public accountability. In conjunction with I-Watch and independent media organizations, it is important to establish a public, fact-based source of information about what foreign funds are coming into the

country and to what parties they are going. Transparency of this kind would help put Tunisians in greater control of their country’s economic life. More immediately, its aim should be to reduce the distrust between parties, and to give republican leaders on all sides the chance to demonstrate that they are working for the good of Tunisia, rather than for the interests of external powers.

The philanthropic sector also must not be neglected. Virtually no private philanthropy exists in the country apart from religious charities. The spread of the latter from the 1990s onward, and especially since 2011, has alleviated economic pain for many, but it has also had undesirable political consequences from the perspective of national sovereignty and self-government. Among other things, it has become a major method for the spread of Salafist and other anti-republican Islamist networks. It also adversely affects political party development. Ennahda’s announced intent to transform into a modern political party faces structural limits because the movement depends, at least in part, on its philanthropic activities to maintain its constituencies. Secularist actors rely on their own forms of patronage to maintain their political power. Establishing an independent and transparent philanthropic sector through legal reform is a vital first step in dealing with this. Moreover, all U.S. economic programs, whether the aim is to foster micro-finance or entrepreneurship, should be designed and evaluated in light of the political goal of reducing the harmful propensity for “machine politics.”

# Political and Civil Society Assistance

Despite large-scale U.S. democracy promotion efforts in Tunisia, it is not yet clear how effective this aid has been. Proponents of conventional democracy assistance argue their work, by its very nature, takes years to bear fruit. In the interim, robust democracy aid is vital for keeping weak institutions afloat and developing personal relationships with indigenous political actors. However, right now in Tunisia, political paralysis and factionalism are worsening. This not only jeopardizes long-term democratic consolidation, it creates opportunities that enemies of both the Tunisian Republic and the U.S. are exploiting.

The U.S. is not adequately equipped to meet this challenge. It is not a question of resources so much as one of capability and political vision. After Ben Ali was toppled, many democracy promotion programs were set up in Tunisia with a preconstructed mindset about what the nascent democracy needed most. As Tunisian observers recount, plans were based not on any deep analysis of local political conditions, but on programmatic calculations, including how much money would be distributed to support projects in a given sector over a certain period. In one of many troubling examples, a U.S. contractor reportedly pulled together a group of dynamic young revolutionaries explaining that he had a few million dollars to give out for raising civic and social awareness. They were encouraged to develop ideas and then given training on how to write grant proposals. The outcome has been the creation of a “civil society industry” that has little to no political traction in wider society. Worse, such democracy promotion practices create dependencies and negatively impact some of Tunisia’s best and brightest.

A rethink of how the U.S. aids democracy is needed. More emphasis needs to be placed on the ideological and political contest between the post-2011 republic and its discontents. Building basic governing capacity,

**A RETHINK OF HOW THE U.S. AIDS DEMOCRACY IS NEEDED. MORE EMPHASIS NEEDS TO BE PLACED ON THE IDEOLOGICAL AND POLITICAL CONTEST BETWEEN THE POST-2011 REPUBLIC AND ITS DISCONTENTS.**

particularly in the South, is necessary, but the locus of the competition now is the struggle inside the main religious and secularist factions and between them that is hindering the formation of a national compact.

As a practical matter, this cannot be done from behind the high walls of U.S. Embassy in Tunis. Instead, it requires more people on the ground, local knowledge, and careful analysis. The focus should be on cultivating essential personal links with emerging republican leaders in government, business, and civil society. At the government level, this compact would consist of issue-based joint conferences and workshops, and legislative staff exchanges to promote reform of governance and cross-factional collaboration in overcoming Tunisia’s problems. Opportunities for nongovernmental cooperation include establishing connections between U.S. and Tunisian labor unions, industries, trade groups, and religious networks, as well as media. Such partnerships are crucial for establishing the essential “teamwork” between Tunisians and Americans needed to win the psychological struggle. It is also vital for identifying and nurturing partnerships over the long-term.

# Ennahda

Ennahda remains the most important player in Tunisian politics, despite coming in second during the 2014 parliamentary elections and the defeat of the party's preferred presidential candidate. The movement as a whole has evolved considerably since 2011 and shows a clear political maturity. The leadership's decision to hand over power in January 2014, the move in June 2016 to separate its proselytization activities from its political activities, and the party's related ideological statements about the "end of Islamism" are important achievements. Ennahda has further attempted to distance itself from the Brotherhood movement in Egypt and elsewhere. U.S. outreach to Ennahda and support for its ongoing transformation from an Islamist movement into a Muslim Democratic party must be a key long-range priority.

Tunisians and Western analysts are split over whether Ennahda's turn away from Islamism is the result of a genuine embrace of democratic pluralism or a tactical shift in response to an increasingly inhospitable and restrictive environment. It is likely a mixture of both. The movement is an amalgamation of divergent trends, including a "post-Islamist" stream with a growing youth following and, on the other end of the spectrum, an essentially Salafist and Islamist bloc that remains ideologically and emotionally attached to the Islamist project. In the reformist view, a democratic and pluralistic Tunisia is already an "Islamic state," therefore there is no more need to rebel against it, and a successful transition is desirable both because it is politically just and because God requires it. This post-Islamist dispensation has been strengthened against the Salafist-Islamist bloc through the work of enlightened leaders as well as changes in Ennahda's overall operating environment. The backlash against Ennahda after the failure of its first government

and broader regional developments, from the crackdown on the Brotherhood in Sisi's Egypt to the rise of the ISIS caliphate movement, have combined to pressure Ennahda to publicly dissociate itself from Islamism out of concern for their own self-preservation.

In devising a political strategy for engaging Ennahda, the U.S. should keep its divergent internal tendencies in mind. It is imperative to work with the reformist tendency and, wherever and however possible, to strengthen it. But the transformation of Ennahda from an Islamist movement into a party of Muslim Democrats is likely to be a complicated and painful process. Because of this, it is essential to engage with the Islamist core, too. Many rank-and-file members believe that domestic secularist elements, including organized labor and the defense ministry, and foreign powers from the U.A.E. to the U.S., do not wish for "Islam" to succeed. They continue to fear the movement will be crushed and its leaders assassinated. This is conspiratorial thinking, to be sure, but it is dangerous because it provides fertile ground for radicals and demagogues to exploit such sentiments. Conspiracy-mongering can only be defanged through sustained diplomacy. If elements of the movement can be reassured about the security and economic benefits of democracy, then it may be possible, in time, to loosen the hold of the Salafist mindset and the old pieties and attachments to the Islamist project.

Going forward, the U.S. needs to be clear-eyed about the temptations of Islamism and how the current balance of power inside the movement may be upset, thereby bringing radicalism to the fore. To mitigate this, the U.S. can and must sustain pressure on radical offshoots of the Muslim Brotherhood across the region, particularly in

Egypt. In Tunisia itself, creating economic alternatives to religious philanthropy and patronage through the aforementioned micro-finance, vocational and entrepreneurship programs will be key in boosting Ennahda's reformers over the long haul. In addition, any effort by Islamists to dominate schools or the security apparatus would be a clear redline for Tunisian secularists that the U.S. should also make clear it will oppose.

At the same time, Tunisia's secularist opposition is in disarray, which has made it more difficult for Ennahda reformers to keep the ambitions of the movement's Islamist core in check. Furthermore, Ghannouchi and Ennahda's current generation of leaders have held the movement together by balancing Salafis and modernists, socialists and capitalists, but these men will not live forever and losing their political talents may send the party into disarray. The U.S. must therefore focus its outreach on the up-and-coming generation to strengthen and institutionalize the democratic and pluralist tendencies in Ennahda. One important influence on Ennahda's evolution and pragmatic approach has been the impact of exile on its thinking. While the experience of living under a laicist tyranny shaped the thinking of Ennahda's founders early on, living in the United Kingdom introduced them to a different set of practices and concepts about the relationship between religious and political authority in modern republics. It is clear Anglo-Saxon ideas have influenced Ghannouchi's shaping of the party's evolution in positive ways. In the UK, Ennahda exiles forged strong ties to left-leaning parties and human rights organizations. They also endured political pressure and scrutiny of their past. Ennahda leaders describe how, through these experiences, they came to dissociate themselves from the wider Islamist movement and embrace more pluralistic notions about society. There are many in the party who don't consider themselves Islamists at all.

It may be difficult to replicate the experiences that shaped Ennahda leaders inside Tunisia, but it is possible. The current leadership has given the reformists important

**THE U.S. MUST SUSTAIN PRESSURE ON RADICAL OFFSHOOTS OF THE MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD, PARTICULARLY IN EGYPT. IN TUNISIA ITSELF, CREATING ECONOMIC ALTERNATIVES TO RELIGIOUS PHILANTHROPY AND PATRONAGE THROUGH MICRO-FINANCE, VOCATIONAL AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP PROGRAMS WILL BE KEY IN BOOSTING ENNAHDA'S REFORMERS.**

space and platforms for debate. The U.S. should work with them to encourage ongoing dialogues, including through English-language and other educational opportunities focused on practical issues. The party is now debating how to structure itself in the future, and it is likewise unclear what will unite it after Islamism. Ennahda lacks a coherent economic message, having forged an alliance of people united only by their Islamist identity. It is therefore necessary for the U.S. to engage with the party, particularly its youth, to develop an actual program that addresses economic and governance reform issues.

While political theology and fear will remain drivers of the movement's behavior, their effects can be minimized. Honor can be a powerful political motivator as well. It is key that the U.S. recognize and honor the current reform and democratic achievements of Ennahda that serve the Tunisian people. The U.S. should also encourage secularist Tunisians to do the same.

# The Children of Bourguiba

Before 2011, many U.S. analysts believed political Islam, rather than secular authoritarians, would shape the future of the Arab world. This analysis affected U.S. assessments of regional developments and policies toward the Arab Spring. Yet, even prior to the revolution, Tunisian secularists were complaining that the U.S. had it wrong and, after 2011, they argued that U.S. policy and democracy promotion efforts were partly responsible for empowering Islamist actors. While some secularists and anti-Islamists still long to reconstruct the laicist order, others are charting a more moderate and conciliatory course. It is vital that U.S. diplomacy and aid does not neglect these vital republican voices of reform.

The secularist camp is currently in turmoil. This internal struggle between competing strains will likely intensify soon as Beiji Caid Essebsi and his generation turn over power to the next. This could have the effect of sharpening the ideological rigidity and nostalgia for the laicist order among secularists, as both could be seen as tempting strategies for unifying the camp. But the strict laicism bequeathed by the Bourguibist project is deeply anti-pluralistic, and it could become as damaging to republic formation as Islamist factionalism. U.S. diplomacy and outreach to secularist actors in government, the media, and elsewhere must recognize this. Just as it does with Ennahda, the U.S. should work directly with Nidaa Tounes to encourage internal democratic processes and honor its efforts to establish a civil democracy. The post-2011 republic would not have made it this far without the enlightened leadership and steady hand of Essebsi and others. The continuation of this and the evolution of secularist politics is as crucial to Tunisian democracy as the evolution of Ennahda.

In addition to working with political parties, U.S. diplomacy and democracy promotion efforts should also focus on non-party secular organizations. Labor and professional associations share basic Western principles and assumptions about political justice that are indispensable to Tunisian republicanism. There are exceptions, but U.S. democracy aid has focused primarily on providing technical advice and building the capacity of civil society actors and political parties. Meanwhile, U.S. outreach has largely ignored important Tunisian political actors like the powerful Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT). This is a mistake.

The Tunisian National Dialogue Quartet arose after the development of serious tensions between political parties following Ennahda's electoral victory in 2011. The large and influential UGTT advocated for a national dialogue between the political factions beginning in June 2012. Continued criticism of the Troika government's effectiveness and the assassination of prominent left-wing politicians sparked the Tunisian Confederation of Industry, Trade and Handicrafts (UTICA), the Tunisian Human Rights League (LTDH), and the Tunisian Order of Lawyers (ONAT) to join UGTT in supporting national dialogue negotiations during the summer of 2013. Together these groups administered discussions between Tunisia's political parties, eventually negotiating the appointment of a caretaker government and the drafting of a new constitution, with parliamentary and presidential elections that followed in late 2014.

The quartet's encouragement of national dialogue produced significant domestic goodwill for its component organizations. These organizations likewise hope their participation in politics will translate to Tunisian policies

beneficial for their constituencies and additional Western support. All four organizations have staked their public credibility on the future results of Tunisia's democratic government, which likely will require them to maintain their role in national politics. Given the geographic spread and political-economic diversity of their membership, associations like the Tunisian General Labor Union represent unique opportunities for U.S. diplomatic engagement to foster democracy. American support cannot be entirely unqualified, however. Importantly, these efforts are not entirely voluntary associations, and some of their political goals—for example, the UGTT's rent-seeking and protection of worker entitlements in the bloated public sector—could hinder the reforms that are vital to growing the economy and forging a lasting democracy. Enlightened labor is as crucial to Tunisian democracy as its unleashed its entrepreneurial potential. U.S. diplomacy should seek to encourage the growth of internal democratic institutions within labor and professional organizations, while engaging them on vital areas of national reform.

**GIVEN THE GEOGRAPHIC SPREAD AND POLITICAL-ECONOMIC DIVERSITY OF THEIR MEMBERSHIP, ASSOCIATIONS LIKE THE TUNISIAN GENERAL LABOR UNION REPRESENT UNIQUE OPPORTUNITIES FOR U.S. DIPLOMATIC ENGAGEMENT TO FOSTER DEMOCRACY.**

## Support for a Contest of Ideas

The secularist-religious divide and the worsening maladaptive contest between the factions are creating opportunities for the enemies of the Tunisian Republic. Addressing this by building bridges of trust between the divided camps is critical. Overall, the give-and-take which democracy requires is malnourished by a vacuum of ideas and poorly developed cross-factional debate in the wider public, and this has had the effect of hardening some of the ideological divides. While the politicians have engaged in a struggle over identity politics, the country has suffered since the revolution from the absence of meaningful discourse that could better the lives of the Tunisian people. The country's political class has proclaimed economic reform as its goal, but so far, the parties have failed to offer a meaningful economic agenda.

Instead of providing classroom-based training and capacity-building for the parties, U.S. democracy aid should be repurposed to stimulate a real competition of ideas on these and other matters at Tunisia's various think tanks and academic centers, as well as and within the parties themselves. As with other countries in the region, local philanthropy in this sector is lacking and the gap, for the time being, can only be filled by outside support.

While investing in a contest of ideas, the U.S. must look for partners in untraditional areas. The current understanding between Essebsi and Ghanouchi was brokered, at least in part, by republican actors in the media and organized labor. These sectors as well as informal networks offer rich opportunities for U.S. political strategy. While Tunisians resorted to non-parliamentary means to solve the 2013 crisis, the U.S. should also focus on strengthening the parliament as a serious institution where the country's differences can be solved. Since 2013, a number of informal groups which work across party lines and the secular-religious divide have, in fact, emerged inside parliament. One of the most important has involved a women's caucus whose members include both secularists and Ennahda. Such groups have weakened the support among Islamists for revising the Personal Status Code because some female members of Ennahda no longer supported the changes. This, and other kinds of politics, represent a healthy development, which can and should be encouraged.

# Education

The republic will not survive if it cannot construct a compelling future for its youth. In this, educational reform is key. However, it has not been a priority of post-2011 Tunisian governments or of Western aid to the country. Yet without a systematic effort to revamp the country's broken educational system and outmoded curricula, Tunisia is unlikely to transform itself into a viable republic. Education reform also offers important political opportunities for contesting anti-republican sentiments and for fostering a national compact across the secularist-religious and regional divides that conventional democracy outreach programs have missed.

The educational system is widely seen by Tunisians as failing their youth. The educational system was inherited from the French and upgraded during the Bourguiba era but since then there has been little institutional innovation and much decay. Tunisians of all backgrounds deeply value education so building a broad-based political coalition should not be difficult. Many have already championed reform. The U.S. should use its power to convene these people and support them in developing and implementing reform plans.

The Tunisian education system has significantly reduced illiteracy but it has struggled to prepare young men and women for a changing job market. Tunisian employers complain the educational system produces ostensibly qualified, yet practically underprepared graduates unready to participate in a globalizing economy. As Tunisian sociologist Tareq Balhadj Mohamed has said, "Tunisian universities produce graduates with degrees but no skills." Tunisian professors Ilham Haouas and Mahmoud Yagoubi have advocated for reform of Tunisian educational institutions' missions so that "producing skills rather than

**THE TUNISIAN EDUCATION SYSTEM HAS SIGNIFICANTLY REDUCED ILLITERACY BUT IT HAS STRUGGLED TO PREPARE YOUNG MEN AND WOMEN FOR A CHANGING JOB MARKET.**

credentials" becomes the goal. Even if new private sector jobs were created by international investment and businesses, Tunisians would struggle to fill them.

Critical to the country's economic vitality is developing an entrepreneurial culture which encourages young Tunisians to create their own business opportunities. Tunisia must develop educational programs from elementary through secondary school that promote entrepreneurship and reinforce qualities such as creativity and collaboration among its children. Financial deregulation and the increased availability of micro-financing, while essential to promoting business creation, will be worthless if Tunisians do not have the technical and intellectual skills to take advantage of the opportunities these efforts create. Instilling these characteristics through education will provide the foundation for the dynamism necessary to turn the country's economic situation around.

The Tunisian government recently created a Ministry for Employment and Vocational Training to address problems related to its under-qualified workforce. This represents an important step, but, according to some Tunisians, it has

**THE U.S. SHOULD EXPAND CURRENT COLLABORATIVE PROGRAMS, ADMINISTERED THROUGH USAID TO SUPPORT TUNISIAN WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT EFFORTS, AND HELP FORGE GREATER PUBLIC-PRIVATE COOPERATION, WHILE EMPOWERING PRIVATE ORGANIZATIONS TO CARRY EDUCATIONAL REFORM FORWARD.**

been poorly supported because the government is preoccupied with urgent security and economic problems. The U.S. should expand current collaborative programs, administered through USAID to support Tunisian workforce development efforts, and help forge greater public-private cooperation, while empowering private

organizations to carry educational reform forward. Reform should also promote English language education both through the official educational system and through outside sources such as AMIDEAST. Such programs are necessary to attract greater multi-national investment, just as they are critical for opening Tunisia to international academia, politics, and commerce.

Reform of civic education is also desperately needed. The old Bourguibist standard for making a modern citizenry is no longer an attractive model for large swathes of the population. This creates opportunities for alternative religious-based education to spread. Insofar as this absence exacerbates the secularist-religious divide, it has become a liability for social cohesion. This will not be remedied unless the benefits of modern education are extended to all Tunisians, including those in the South. In part, this undertaking calls for capacity building, which can be accomplished through direct assistance to the educational sector, or more crucially, through organizing and empowering reformers to accomplish reform themselves.

# Political Opportunities in the Security Sector

Since 2011, the U.S. and European nations have poured considerable resources into the Tunisian military and police. A great deal of this aid focuses on capacity building, and Tunisian security officials are quick to produce long lists of equipment they need to fend off Islamic State and other threats. Meanwhile, important efforts have also been launched by the United States Institute of Peace and other organizations to focus on police education, cut back on corruption, and implement Rule of Law. By their nature, such initiatives will take years to produce results and require long-term U.S. support. In the interim, the U.S. needs a sustained diplomatic and public outreach plan to maintain pressure for security sector reform and to ensure reforms reinforce the burgeoning democracy.

The Tunisian police have an established history of corruption and complaints of abuse have increased since the removal of Ben Ali. Police corruption poses a critical threat to Tunisia's transition and must be dealt with urgently. A political strategy needs to be implemented to improve the public's confidence in the police and promote the idea that reform is happening. Though the media have targeted police corruption and abuse, the coverage has been limited and sporadic. A campaign to report abuse and corruption, and to highlight instances of good police work and the positive effects of reform, needs to be coordinated. Beyond changing police behavior, the goal should be to raise the society's overall expectations of the police and its purpose as a civilian security force.

The military also has a role in enhancing the political legitimacy of the democratic transition and overcoming the coastal-hinterland divide. The sidelining of the military under Ben Ali meant that it is not wholly associated in the

**THE TUNISIAN POLICE HAVE AN ESTABLISHED HISTORY OF CORRUPTION AND COMPLAINTS OF ABUSE HAVE INCREASED SINCE THE REMOVAL OF BEN ALI. POLICE CORRUPTION POSES A CRITICAL THREAT TO TUNISIA'S TRANSITION AND MUST BE DEALT WITH URGENTLY.**

public's mind with the former regime's policies. The institution emerged from 2011 with a good reputation. While the military did not receive any order to shoot at protesters during the revolution, the very fact that many Tunisians believed that such an order was given and rejected by army chief of staff General Rashid Ammar further enhanced the military's reputation and made General Ammar a national hero. During the political crisis of 2013, the military's resistance to secularists' calls to remove the government from power (like what happened in Egypt) also helped boost its public reputation and reflected the professionalism of its officers.

After 2011, the military's good reputation led to a larger defense budget and increased influence in decision-making, especially as the country faced growing security challenges. The military's expanded role and General Ammar's popularity frightened the post-revolutionary caretaker government, especially President Moncef Marzouki. As a result, the civil government has left the

position of armed forces chief of staff vacant, instead continuing Ben Ali's system of three separate commands for the main branches. While the political leadership's fears of a strengthened military are understandable, this policy undermines the military's effectiveness. A unified military command must be established to effectively combat Islamic State. Moreover, the U.S. should work with the military to reinforce its professionalism and, together with the parliament, should ensure that a healthy civil-military relationship is institutionalized. The U.S. will find support for this critical objective both in the military and in the parliament.

Ultimately, the military needs to be reorganized around a new mission: nation-building at home. The uneasy civil-military relationship led President Marzouki to promote officers from the country's interior regions who had historically been denied promotions. This process needs to be encouraged and expanded, as the recruitment and promotion of officers from the interior regions could be a useful vehicle for national integration. Among other things, it provides a clear track for young men in the south to become leaders in the new republic and, over time, it can help build a military that reflects the whole of Tunisian society. At the same time, any form of positive discrimination will continue to provoke resentment from officers from the coastal areas, accustomed to their privileges and dominance among the military ranks. The

**IF THE MILITARY EMERGES AS A  
KEY NATION-BUILDING  
INSTITUTION IN TUNISIA, IT CAN  
ALSO BECOME A MODEL AND U.S.  
PARTNER FOR REFORMING  
NEIGHBORING MILITARIES, AS  
OPPORTUNITIES PRESENT**

U.S. needs to understand and account for this dynamic as it works with the Tunisian government. Again, parliament as a representative body is likely to be more of a partner in this effort than the established Tunis bureaucracy, which is vested in protecting the old ways. The U.S. could also offer more opportunities for Tunisian officers to study at U.S. military schools, but more important, a formal and comprehensive effort to reform officer training inside Tunisia is needed. For this, officer education needs to emphasize not just complex military operations in urban environments and the interior regions, but also Rule of Law and tactical economics. Over the long-term, if the military emerges as a key nation-building institution in Tunisia, it can also become a model and U.S. partner for reforming neighboring militaries, as opportunities present.

# Political Sovereignty and Domestic Religious Affairs

The Bourguibist state systematically degraded traditional religious institutions such as the venerated Zaytuna mosque, long a center of Islamic thought for the whole of North Africa. Ben Ali continued the laicist policies of his predecessor and exercised tight control over the message emanating from Tunisian imams. All in all, this left religious authorities deeply weakened and with little public sway. Many analysts in Tunisia—both religious and secularists—agree that the weakening of indigenous religious authorities is at the root of the current vacuum in which what Rached Ghannouchi terms “external alien ideologies” have managed to gain traction.

Political authorities have increasingly lost control over the religious scene. Beginning in the 1990s, just like other Arabic-speaking countries, Tunisia came to be saturated with Salafist ideology from Egypt and the Gulf, which entered the country via satellite television and then the Internet. After Ben Ali’s overthrow, Salafis asserted their newfound freedom by working to install Salafi imams in Tunisian mosques, bringing them beyond the reach of the Ministry of Religious Affairs, which only recently has started to think about how to deal with this democratically.

In addition to promoting public clarity over foreign funding of domestic political and religious actors as discussed earlier, the U.S. has opportunities to help strengthen Tunisia’s indigenous institutions and traditions to better cope with the problem of “external alien ideologies.” Sufis, state-supported imams, many secularists, and Ennahda all agree on the need to harness the power of indigenous religious institutions to

roll back malign influence from abroad. A leading Sufi imam said that direct help from the U.S. in countering violent extremist narratives would be welcomed. In addition to helping with capacity issues and training personnel to develop a country-wide groundgame to contest radical ideology, the U.S. can assist Tunisians by connecting them with religious reformers elsewhere in the region, perhaps especially from Morocco. Despite distrust between their governments, both Moroccan and Tunisian religious scholars have expressed to us an interest in deepening their collaboration with one another. After the 2013 Casablanca bombings, the Moroccan monarchy declared war on “ideologies from the East” and it has since implemented arguably the most comprehensive effort to combat jihadi ideology in the Arabic-speaking world. It has enjoyed considerable success in fostering politically moderate Islamic discourses to compete with Salafi narratives and discourage youth from accepting radical guidance from Salafi and jihadi sources. Partnering with organizations such as the Rabita Mohamedia des Oulémas, which is dedicated to reviving Morocco’s indigenous traditions of tolerance and piety and dismantling alien ideologies, would be useful for Tunisian religious organizations which face a similar set of threats. Radicals have created substantial networks throughout the Maghreb. Responsible states in the Maghreb will need to work together and build their own transnational infrastructure to effectively compete.

The Zaytuna Mosque has become an important locus of the unfolding struggle for Tunisia’s religious future.<sup>9</sup> Following the decline of Kairouan in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, the

---

<sup>9</sup> For more, see Haim Malka, “The Struggle for Religious Identity in Tunisia and the Maghreb,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, May 2, 2014, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/struggle-religious-identity-tunisia-and-maghreb>.

center of Islamic learning in Tunisia, and North Africa in general, was moved to Zaytuna. For centuries, the mosque served as more than just a place of prayer, hosting a venerable university that produced numerous scholars such as Ibn Khaldun. Until the eve of independence in 1956, the mosque still enjoyed a positive reputation across the Arabic-speaking world. Zaytuna functioned as the country's historical moral center and post-2011 desires to strengthen indigenous religious institutions against alien ideas have involved recapturing Zaytuna's power. However, theological disputes and practical considerations have prevented a consensus on how to achieve this. Religious conservatives and Islamists want the mosque to provide a theological counterweight to Salafi and jihadi ideology by redeveloping its religious faculty, a point on which most Tunisians agree. But, Sufis, secularists and liberals are skeptical of conservatives' motives and simultaneously advocate for the state to embrace more tolerant and indigenous Islamic doctrines than conservatives prefer.

This and related religious disputes will not be resolved any time soon, but their overall trajectory could be improved if they can be successfully incorporated into the national political debate about the Tunisian Republic. It is important to stress, for example, that Zaytuna is a Tunisian institution and, as such, its purpose is to serve Tunisian Muslims. This is a central theme—Tunisia First—

that needs to be amplified, and there are many opportunities to do so, including at Zaytuna itself. Tunisian religious and academic leaders expressed a real desire for intellectual and other exchanges with Western scholars, including on Tunisian religious history. Indeed, the story of Tunisia's rejection of "external alien ideologies" in the 19th Century provides a rich basis on which to build an intellectual and public education campaign about why, and how, Tunisia can cope with the ideological forces that are invading it now.

The U.S. can also connect Tunisian religious and secularist actors with Anglo-American institutions and thinkers on religion and politics, which can provide an alternative to the political cul-de-sacs of Islamism and unreconstructed laicism. Reformers at Tunisian universities argue the teaching of religion should involve a global perspective emphasizing universal points of commonality and promoting tolerance. Tunisia's Manouba University has established a postgraduate program in comparative and world religion, the first program of its kind in the Arabic-speaking world. This and other intellectual programs aim to reconceive religious instruction and train new teachers. To be sure, this is bound to be a long and complicated process. Nevertheless, a national religious discourse that embraces pluralism and abets republic-formation will be necessary if the Tunisians are to keep their new republic.

## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

**ERIC BROWN** is a senior fellow at Hudson Institute where he studies Middle East and Asian affairs, international security and development, alternative geopolitical futures, and U.S. diplomacy and strategy. He is also co-editor, with Hillel Fradkin and Husain Haqqani, of the journal *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, and has written for many other publications. He has conducted research throughout Eurasia on strategic, governance and development issues, including on U.S. security and political assistance to contested and fragile countries.

**SAMUEL TADROS** is a Senior Fellow at Hudson Institute's Center for Religious Freedom. At Hudson, he has researched the rise of Islamist movements in the Middle East and its implications on religious freedom and regional politics. Mr. Tadros is a Professorial Lecturer at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies, and a Distinguished Visiting Fellow in Middle Eastern Studies at Hoover Institution.

Prior to joining Hudson in 2011, Tadros was a Senior Partner at the Egyptian Union of Liberal Youth, an organization that aims to spread the ideas of classical liberalism in Egypt.

Hudson Institute  
1201 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W. Suite 400, Washington D.C. 20004  
202.974.2400 [www.hudson.org](http://www.hudson.org)