

American Foreign Policy Council

TUNISIA

QUICK FACTS

Population: Number 11,134,588 (estimated July 2016)

Area: 163,610 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Arab 98%, European 1%, Jewish and other 1%

Religions: Muslim 99.1% (official; Sunni), other (includes Christian, Jewish, Shia Muslim and Baha'i) 1%

Government Type: Republic

GDP (official exchange rate): \$43.58 billion (estimated 2015)

Map and Quick Facts courtesy of the CIA World Factbook (December 2016)

OVERVIEW

The self-immolation of twenty-six-year-old fruit vendor Mohamed Bouazizi precipitated mass protests in December 2010. These mass protests led to unprecedented social and political upheaval in Tunisia the following year, and helped launch the larger “Arab Spring” revolutions that swept across the Middle East throughout 2011. The revolution in Tunisia ended the decades-long reign of authoritarian leader Zine el-Abedine Ben Ali, thus ending the restrictive one-party structure that had been the norm in Tunisia since 1956. Into this newly opened field came previously suppressed opposition movements, formerly exiled politicians, and new political groups.

Following the revolution, Tunisia held elections to a National Constituent Assembly on October 23, 2011, following the collapse of Ben Ali’s regime. Both domestic and foreign observers judged the elections to be “free and fair.”¹ The National Constituent Assembly was charged with appointing an interim government and writing Tunisia’s new constitution.² In the ensuing vote, the Islamist Ennahda party won the most

votes of any single party, gaining control of 90 out of the body's 217 seats.³ Rather than being a strictly radical movement, Ennahda's members reflect a diversity of opinion on both religious and political issues. Furthermore, the group sought to foster cooperation among Tunisian Islamists in the post-revolutionary political environment.⁴

Between December 2011 and January 2014, an Ennahda prime minister led the interim government in a coalition with centrist and liberal parties. The resignation of this government in January 2014, the result of a political compromise, seems to validate Ennahda's willingness to operate within established political norms. However, extremist groups have increased their activities, and a country with almost no history of political violence has had to confront Islamist-origin violent demonstrations, political assassinations, and both attempted and actual terrorism. The attack that sparked the most international attention was the assassination of 38 people in Sousse, Tunisia in June 2015. Meanwhile, non-violent salafism has attracted many, especially youth, who are frustrated and disillusioned that the new post-revolution order has been unable to address the issues of jobs, the economy, and social justice.⁵

However, Tunisia's more meaningful role in the wider world of Islamism comes not from its domestic politics, but from its status as a major supplier of foreign fighters. The Tunisian government estimates that approximately 3,000 Tunisians have left home to fight in Syria. Independent analysts and the United Nations estimate that 6,000 – 7,000 have left Tunisia to fight in Iraq, Syria, and Libya in al-Qaeda affiliates and the Islamic State. While exact numbers of foreign fighters are notoriously difficult to estimate, the fact remains that Tunisians make up a significant portion of the estimated 40,000 jihadi fighters that have gone to Syria and Iraq.⁶

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

Ennahda

Founded in 1981, Ennahda was inspired by Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood.⁷ During its time in office, the government of Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali suppressed the group as political opposition and exiled its leader, Rachid Ghannouchi, in 1989. After Ben Ali's ouster, Ghannouchi returned to Tunisia, and the party moved quickly to re-establish itself.

Tunisia's modern Islamist movement finds its roots in the Quranic Preservation Society, which was formed in 1970 with the government's approval. The organization was apolitical, dedicated primarily to encouraging piety and faithfulness. It was placed

under the Ministry of Religious Affairs and supported by President Bourguiba as a counterweight to the country's political left.⁸ Islamists attracted to the Society were not necessarily anti-regime and, in fact, shared some of the regime's views, including its opposition to Communism.⁹ They accordingly did not see the need to confront the government and did not see a role for themselves in social and political change, which was the province of the left.

Their approach began to change in the late 1970s, when growing social unrest in other sectors, especially organized labor, politicized the movement. Several Islamists broke from the Quranic Preservation Society—including Rachid al-Ghannouchi, who founded al-Jamaat al-Islamiyya (The Islamic Group) and explicitly called for the end of Bourguiba's one-party rule.¹⁰ In 1978, a year that saw serious economic-based rioting across the country, the "Movement of Islamic Renewal" emerged as a loose-knit coalition of Islamist groups. By the following year, Ghannouchi's group, then called the *Mouvement de la Tendance Islamique* (MTI), emerged as the backbone of this grouping.¹¹

MTI issued a political platform in 1981 that included calls for equitable economic reform, an end to one-party rule, and a return to the "fundamental principles of Islam."¹² These objectives were sufficiently vague and appealing to attract broad support from people across Tunisian society. The group requested recognition as a political party, but was denied such by the government, and most of its leaders were jailed until 1984, when they were released through a general amnesty.¹³ Over the course of the 1980s, MTI became younger and more populist in nature, and evolved into a well-organized social and political movement linked with the broader civil rights movement in the country.¹⁴ It was considered pro-democracy and was the first Islamist group in the Arab world to explicitly adopt democratic principles; in his writings, Ghannouchi favored Islamist participation in pluralist politics.¹⁵

In November 1987, Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, whom President Bourguiba had recently appointed Prime Minister, ousted the sitting president in a bloodless palace coup. The coup was greeted with relief by the public, as Bourguiba's age and poor health had seriously degraded his judgment and decision-making capabilities. Ben Ali promised reform and democratization, and Ghannouchi, who sought to openly participate in political life, undertook to cooperate with the new President. He signed Ben Ali's "National Pact," which was essentially a social contract between the government and civil and political groups, and then sought to run a list of candidates in the 1989 legislative elections.¹⁶ But Ben Ali soon changed course and, among other measures, prohibited any party's name to contain the words "Islam" or "Islamic" (the prohibition of religiously-identified parties remains in place today.) The MTI duly renamed itself *Hizb Ennahda*, the Renaissance Party. However, Ben Ali still refused to allow Ennahda to enter the elections as a recognized political party, although he did permit it to field "independent" candidates. Islamists subsequently received 15 percent of the nationwide vote (up to 30 percent in urban areas), but failed to win any

seats in the legislature (by contrast, the five recognized secular opposition parties collectively received only 5 percent of the vote).¹⁷ The ruling Constitutional Democratic Rally Party (RCD), the successor to Bourguiba's Neo-Destour (New Constitution) Party, received 80 percent of the vote—a function of both general voter satisfaction and effective regime vote-rigging and polling place intimidation. But the unexpectedly strong performance of the Islamists within the opposition, coupled with Ennahda's increasingly strident political rhetoric, caused the regime to deny Ennahda's second request for recognition. An escalating cycle of protest and repression ensued, and Ghannouchi fled to London in 1989.¹⁸ By 1992, virtually all of Ennahda's leadership had been imprisoned and its organizational capabilities within the country destroyed. Although it was commonly understood that Ennahda was effectively dismantled in the early 1990s, many Tunisians, including Ben Ali, believed it maintained a structure and presence in the country, albeit perhaps a “sleeping” one.¹⁹

Ennahda's ideology is thoroughly rooted in the ideology of its founder, Rachid Ghannouchi, who views the Koran and the Hadith as “an anchor for political thought and practice.”²⁰ However, he appears to interpret Koranic texts in the context of Western political thinking and modern concepts of political freedoms: the dignity of human beings, human rights, and Koranic prohibitions against Muslim dictators.²¹ Ghannouchi himself is a “literalist” and believes that it is the duty of Muslims to establish Islamic government where attainable; in practice, he has endorsed multi-party politics.²² He does not advocate government by clerics, and has said that “[t]he state is not something from God but from the people... the state has to serve the benefit of the Muslims.”²³ His idea of an Islamic political regime appears to be a strong presidential system with an elected president and elected parliament, and considers the parliamentary system a legitimate means of political participation.²⁴

Ghannouchi's public statements since his return from exile, and those of other Ennahda figures, have been consistent with this worldview. He has said that his party will accept the outcome of fair and democratic elections, and that he himself will not run for president.²⁵ In a March 2, 2012 address to a civil society conference, Ghannouchi asserted that, “...We are in need of scholars and intellectuals to debate and study our issues in a climate of freedom, and accept that the legislative institution is the ultimate authority by virtue of being elected.”²⁶ Applying his views to the prevailing political situation in Tunisia at the time, he stated,

The fact that our revolution has succeeded in toppling a dictator, we ought to accept the principle of citizenship, and that this country does not belong to one party or another but rather to all its citizens regardless of their religion, sex, or any other consideration.²⁷

Once in power following the October 2011 elections, however, the Ennahda-led government (Ghannouchi himself assumed no elected or appointed position) appeared to many to be practicing the same sort of majoritarianism and attempting to control

all the political levers of national power, in much the same way as the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood would once it assumed power in Cairo the following year. At the same time, the government was seen as tolerating the disruptive and sometimes violent actions of Salafi elements while simultaneously cracking down on secular demonstrations. In a widely-cited example of this alleged, police allowed the Salafist “occupation” of Manouba University to drag on for several weeks, but quickly used force to break up peaceful anti-Ennahda demonstrations in central Tunis in April 2012.

The issue came to a head with the assassination of two leftist politicians in 2013, killings that were widely seen as the work of Salafists emboldened by Ennahda sympathies. Popular demonstrations against the government grew. Opposition parties, which coalesced into a political umbrella called the “National Salvation Front,” called for the dissolution of the National Constituent Assembly and for new elections. Also, the process of writing the country’s new, post-Ben Ali constitution had proven to be both protracted and contentious, the economy was still far from robust, and the social environment was one of public frustration and pessimism. Ennahda leaders realized that some sort of national compromise was necessary, lest they go the way of the Muslim Brotherhood and President Morsi in Egypt (albeit not by the hands of the national army). Various compromises were suggested, and Ennahda offered some concessions to its political opponents. Popular demonstrations and civil disobedience waned in the Fall of 2013, and the two sides decided to negotiate a way forward. Finally, a National Dialogue led by Tunisia’s labor union federation brokered a compromise in early January 2014, under which the Ennahda-led government would step down in favor of an interim, technocratic administration that would lead the country to new elections, while the Constituent Assembly (about 42% Islamist) would remain and finish the constitution.

All sides agreed to this framework, and by the end of January 2014 the new constitution was drafted and approved by the Constituent Assembly. Serious unrest was avoided, the new constitution was widely accepted, and the country appeared to be moving ahead. At the time, Ennahda appeared to indicate that it would accept the outcome of prospective power-sharing under this structure, with Ghannouchi telling a Washington, DC audience in February 2014 that:

the Tunisian experience has proven to those doubting the intentions of Islamists that Islam and democracy are compatible, and that victims of decades of repression, marginalization, and exclusion are not carrying hatred or the desire for revenge, but rather an enlightened modernist civil project as embodied in the new Tunisian constitution, which has been adopted with the widest possible consensus.²⁸

However, there are indications that younger party members do not see this as a reasonable and necessary compromise, but as the secularist-compelled surrender of political Islam’s “main chance” by a weak leadership.²⁹ Ennahda’s philosophies on the re-

lationship between religion and government, meanwhile, have continued to develop over time. In May 2016, during its 10th party congress, 93.5 percent of Ennahda's delegates voted to separate religious and political activities into separate branches. This decision means that elected officials can no longer hold positions both in the party and in broader society, which includes mosques and Islamic organizations.

Ennahda has shown a historical unwillingness to crack down on Salafi-jihadists. This hesitance stems from Ennahda's perception that Salafi-jihadists are young and misguided, as well as from sympathy generated by Ennahda's own history of repression under Ben Ali's regime.³⁰ Ennahda has counseled Salafi-jihadists to follow a strategy of "bishwaya bishwaya" (slowly, slowly), worried that the aggressive tactics and rapid advance of the latter might alarm opponents. Salafi-jihadists, however, have found that argument unconvincing.³¹

At times, however, Ennahda nonetheless has acted against Islamist elements. In April 2013, it declared Ansar al-Sharia, the largest Salafi group in Tunisia, a terrorist organization.³² Since then, Ennahda has adopted a more security-oriented approach to Salafi-jihadism, entailing the forced registration of Salafis at police stations and the stationing of plain-clothes police officers in public spaces. While many members of Ennahda are uncomfortable with these measures, as well as with continuing police brutality in Tunisia,³³ the rise of Salafi-jihadism domestically and internationally has made public criticism of these policies challenging.³⁴

Other Islamist movements

While Ennahda dominates Tunisian Islamism, other Islamist groups do exist, though they tend to be small in size and loosely organized.

Salafist parties

On May 11, 2012, the Tunisian government granted a license to the Salafist *Jebahat el-Islah*, (JI), or "Reform Front" to operate as a party under the Political Parties Law (which requires respect for the "civil principles of the state"). It was the first Salafist group to be recognized as such.³⁵ During this time, Ennahda may have been more inclined to encourage pluralism in Muslim politics in order to better govern a politically diverse country.³⁶ JI has several leaders who were jailed during the 1980s and claims that it rejects violence, respects democracy, and does not seek to impose duct.³⁷ A second Salafist party, *Al-Rahma* ("Mercy") was legalized in July 2012. Its stated goal is the establishment of sharia law. Neither *Rahma* nor JI are particularly popular.³⁸ JI remains unwaveringly dedicated to bringing sharia law into Tunisia, but

younger Salafi-jihadis tend to see the legislative route of enacting sharia as too slow and unwieldy to have much appeal.³⁹ Furthermore, most of JI's membership consists of older men, and the group has failed to attract younger Tunisians to its cause.⁴⁰

El-Zeituna Party

The non-Salafist El Zeituna Party (named after the historic mosque and school in Tunis) officially announced its establishment in February 2014 and its intention to participate in the next presidential and parliamentary elections. The announcement outlined its position, which is based on the Koran and Sunnah and which "respects the legal legitimacy and the state's constitutional institutions." Its leaders are dissatisfied with the January 2014 constitution, and their goals include reform of the judicial system and establishment of an "Islamic economic system based on the just distribution of wealth."⁴¹

Ansar al-Sharia Tunisiyya

Ansar al-Sharia Tunisiyya (Supporters of Islamic Law, or AST) was established in April 2011. Though there are many groups throughout the world that go by the name of Ansar al-Sharia, these organizations are not part of a united chain of command. Terrorism analyst Aaron Zelin writes: "(Ansar al-Sharia groups) are fighting in different lands using different means, but all for the same end, an approach better suited for the vagaries born of the Arab uprisings."⁴² This approach allows the groups to appear to be part of a unified transnational jihadi movement, while in reality addressing the unique environment of each country.

The Tunisian group's founder, Abu Ayyad al-Tunisi, was a jihadist who had fought in Afghanistan and was subsequently arrested and deported to Tunisia as a terrorist in 2003. He was freed with many other prisoners after the revolution.⁴³ AST has claimed responsibility for the 2012 attack on the U.S. Embassy and the assassinations of liberal politicians Chokri Belaid and Mohamed Brahmi in February and July 2013.⁴⁴ Its most recent attack occurred in 2014, when AST militants attacked Tunisian soldiers at checkpoints near the Algerian border. 14 people were killed in that incident.⁴⁵

In July 2014, an AST spokesman declared AST's allegiance to Islamic State emir Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi.⁴⁶ AST has recruited heavily for ISIS in Tunisia, and encourages many young Tunisians to make the journey to Syria. Tunisians travel to Syria to wage jihad alongside a number of groups, but most commonly with ISIS.⁴⁷ ISIS also features Tunisians prominently in its own propaganda, often lauding the efforts and martyrdom of Tunisian foreign fighters.⁴⁸ However, the extent of the tactical connec-

tions between the two groups is unclear. AST, in general, has been less focused on violent attacks and more focused on *dawa* (proselytization) and community service.⁴⁹ As noted in the State Department's 2015 report on terrorist groups, AST's strength and numbers, as well as its foreign aid and financing, remain unknown.⁵⁰

Hizb ut-Tahrir

Another potentially dangerous group is Hizb ut-Tahrir (the Islamic Liberation Party), an international movement founded in 1953 that seeks to re-establish the Islamic Caliphate. This group established a presence in Tunisia in 1973, but historically had only a few dozen members in the country.⁵¹ It emerged publicly after the 2011 revolution and declared its goal of competing in elections and offering its "alternative constitution" to the Constituent Assembly.⁵² While the group claims to renounce violence, it does not rule out rebellion and civil disobedience to establish an Islamic state. It believes in the re-establishment of the Muslim Caliphate and in sharia law as the source of the constitution.⁵³ Its spokesman announced that Hizb ut-Tahrir is preparing for an ideological and political struggle to save the nation.⁵⁴ Many Tunisians, including members of Ennahda, believe with good reason that Hizb ut-Tahrir would, if it won an election, ban other parties and implement "one man, one vote, one time."⁵⁵ Its request for a license to operate as a political party was initially denied in March 2012 (as was that of the "Tunisian Sunni" party), but that decision was later and Hizb ut-Tahrir became a recognized political party later in 2012.⁵⁶ The organization's cooperation with the government proved to be short-lived, however. In September 2016, the Tunisian government requested that a military court ban the group, as it has been accused repeatedly of "undermining public order" since 2012. An anonymous official confirmed that the request had been submitted to a military investigative judge, and that the government was awaiting the judge's reply.⁵⁷

Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb

Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), which did not have a significant presence or recruiting base in Tunisia in the past, is now active, especially in the western part of the country. While AQIM has apparently not conducted suicide bomb-type terrorist operations in Tunisia, its "conventional" forces, armed with weapons looted from Libyan arsenals, have engaged Tunisian security forces with deadly results. In 2014, AQIM claimed responsibility for the attack on the home of the interior minister, Lotfi Ben Jeddou.⁵⁸

Some AQIM members have defected to ISIS in recent times,⁵⁹ and the group has been weakened in recent years. In 2015, Tunisian counterterrorism operations

eliminated much of the group's leadership. Furthermore, ISIS has co-opted some of AQIM's support cells along Tunisia's border with Algeria, taking supplies for themselves.⁶⁰

The Islamic State

The Islamic State does not currently hold any territory in Tunisia, but the country still plays a vital role in the group's operations.⁶¹ As previously discussed, a large percentage of ISIS's foreign fighters come from Tunisia; between 6,000-7,000 Tunisians (of a total of some 40,000 or more foreign fighters) have gone to fight in Iraq, Syria, and Libya to date.⁶² ISIS also uses the highly porous border between Tunisia and Libya, where it maintains a sizeable presence, to smuggle guns and fighters into the country.⁶³ In an effort to further destabilize Tunisia and its economy, ISIS fighters have attacked cities and tourists locales.⁶⁴

ISIS has launched a number of notable attacks in Tunisia to date. In November 2014, ISIS claimed responsibility for the bombing of a presidential guard bus. The blast killed twelve presidential guards.⁶⁵ In March 2015, two ISIS-trained gunmen killed 21 tourists and one Tunisian at the Bardo National Museum in Tunis. The Islamic State also took responsibility for the 2015 Sousse shooting that killed 39 and wounded 36. In March 2016, 50 gunmen affiliated with ISIS, many of whom were part of sleeper cells coordinated attacks on "security installations and security personnel in the border town of Ben Guerdane." Security forces killed 49 of the militants, while 17 security officials and seven civilians were killed.⁶⁶ In November 2016, the Islamic State claimed the killing of a Tunisian Air Force soldier who was found dead in his home.⁶⁷ Two days after the killing, the Tunisian National Security Council announced that it had undertaken a new strategy to fight extremism and terrorism. President Beji Caid Essebsi's office said the strategy was based on "prevention, protection, judicial proceedings and retaliation." No other details about the plan have as yet been revealed.⁶⁸

ISIS has used Libya's virtual collapse to solidify its presence in that nation. There is ample evidence that the group plans to use its base in Libya to begin to infiltrate Tunisia as well. The Ben Guerdane attack (which took place near the border with Libya) illustrates that the Islamic State is quite capable of doing so. The growing chaos and instability in Libya poses a serious security threat for Tunisia. As the Libyan state collapses, ISIS and other jihadi groups will only grow stronger. As ISIS continues to gain ground in Libya, it will step up its attacks in Tunisia, and more incidents as the Ben Guerdane attack may occur. Furthermore, as ISIS gains prestige and power, more young Tunisians may be tempted to cross the border and join the group in Libya.

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

Tunisians tend to be moderate in their views and behavior. Habib Bourguiba, the country's first president following its independence from France in the 1950s, was supported by the public and set a moderate political course. Guerrilla warfare and terrorism did not characterize the struggle, and there were no violent purges and settling of accounts among the victors of the sort that led to continued crisis and near-civil war in neighboring Algeria.

Tunisia is an unusually homogenous country for its neighborhood. Ninety-eight percent of its 11 million person population is Sunni Muslim.⁶⁹ Shi'ites number perhaps in the thousands, most of them converts to the sect following the 1979 Iranian Revolution.⁷⁰ There is a small Jewish community concentrated on the island of Djerba, and there are virtually no indigenous Christians in the country. While there are differences between Arabs and Berbers, ethnicity is not a significant factor, and no "identity politics" exist to fuel conflict and instability. Neither is there a large socio-economic gulf between rich and poor to create tensions. As a result of some very sound economic decisions by the Ben Ali government, Tunisia has developed an expansive urbanized middle class, and a very large percentage of Tunisians have a stake in maintaining the system. There is, however, a geographical "have/have not" gap, and the poorer southern interior has not historically been a focus of development. Most dissident movements, including Islamist forces, have originated in this region, and it was the cradle of the "Jasmine Revolution." Equitable distribution of wealth to all regions remains an important unsolved issue, especially after the revelations of Ben Ali family corruption, and a number of Tunisians have advocated renationalizing and relocating businesses to ensure fairness in the geographical distribution of opportunities.⁷¹

But relative prosperity was insufficient to prevent upheaval. The 2011 revolution was not about bread and jobs alone. Rather, it was also about dignity and the state's relationship with the people. A stroll along Avenue Habib Bourguiba in downtown Tunis has long provided a useful barometer of the extent of unemployment among young men. Without a job and the means to support a family, these young men cannot marry, start a family, and fully participate in society. Frustration is the result, and a portion of frustrated youth, albeit a very small one, is attracted to the fringes of society, including radical Islamism.

Salafism is growing across the country and, while it does not necessarily manifest in terrorist acts, it is disruptive and often violent. Salafists reportedly control up to 150 mosques in the country, a development being closely watched by the Religious Affairs Ministry.⁷² Some of these radical imams are calling young Tunisians to join the jihad against the Syrian regime of Bashar Assad, something of great interest to the Interior Ministry.⁷³ In recent years, estimates for the number of fighters who have left Tunisia to fight abroad range from 3,000 to 7,000.⁷⁴ Furthermore, nearly 700 of these fighters have since returned to Tunisia. Many of these returning fighters are sent to jail or

are placed under state surveillance.⁷⁵ However, the government has never developed a clear strategy for dealing with these individuals and reintegrating them into society “so they don’t turn into time bombs that may explode any moment.”⁷⁶

While Islamism has not, and most likely will not, take hold among Tunisians en masse, religious sentiment was growing steadily prior to the revolution. Youth were exposed to this phenomenon primarily at university, especially when secular, modernist, and leftist movements were at best weak and marginalized, and at worst outlawed and suppressed. Beneath the modernism and sophisticated worldview exhibited by the population as a whole, Tunisia is a traditional society that values its religion and cultural heritage. The Ben Ali regime began to recognize this and attempted to “Islamize” society and use religion to support government policies.⁷⁷ This “Official” or “Popular” Islam was designed to counter the threat of extremism and terrorism by preaching the values of moderation and tolerance and, at the same time, claiming ownership of Tunisians’ Islamic identity, which had been denied by past regimes.⁷⁸ This effort was supported by many Tunisians; as an example, Radio Zeytouna, a religious station established in 2009 by the Ben Ali government as a counterweight to Islamist satellite networks, was popular with the public and had a good audience base.

Although Islamists and Ennahda failed over the years to gain the active support of the public, there is sympathy for the vision expressed by the movement—that is, political and economic reform and living by Islamic principles. Most Tunisians do not appear to consider Ghannouchi and other Islamists as saviors of society, but rather simply people who express an appealing vision.⁷⁹ Many of those who join the movement do not necessarily support the establishment of an Islamic regime.⁸⁰

Tunisians do not like violent transition, but they do believe in good governance, freedoms, and rule of law. They are very protective of their *acquis* (patrimony: the shared cultural, political, social, legal experiences), which they believe distinguishes them from their neighbors. Because of this, any political or religious movement that wants to play a role in society will have to preserve and improve these values, and not reject or destroy them.

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

The Tunisian state was hostile to Islamism from independence in 1956 through the end of the Ben Ali regime. Habib Bourguiba, the hero of the liberation and president between 1956 and 1987, dominated the country through force of personality and an efficient political party structure organized down to the lowest grassroots. He made an early decision to devote the country’s energies and limited resources to social modernization and economic growth, and not to democracy and political pluralism. Bourguiba steadily consolidated government control over political life in order to avoid the chaos and serial coups d’etat that characterized much of the Arab and African post-colonial experience. The Tunisian people essentially shared this objective

and acquiesced to extensive limitations on political participation. Bourguiba's politics were strictly secular, and he insisted that the country would be also. He ignored the country's Arab/Islamic history and connected modern Tunisia directly to a pre-Islamic past—its Carthaginian heritage—while simultaneously secularizing the state and weakening traditional Islamic institutions.⁸¹ At the same time, his regime embarked upon an economic and social development program based on a socialist model. This model failed, and the government changed course; the eventual result was impressive economic performance and very progressive social programs involving public education and literacy, economic mobility, and the position of women in society.

The process of tightening regime control accelerated after the 1987 “palace coup” by Ben Ali, who maintained that no accommodation with Islamists was possible, and who considered Islamism to be a disease against which the public must be “inoculated.” The country's 2003 anti-terrorism law allowed the jailing of those threatening national security. It was used almost exclusively against Islamists, primarily Islamist-leaning youths using the Internet “illegally” (i.e., blogging or visiting jihadist websites).⁸²

The pre-January 2011 state of affairs in Tunisia was one of comprehensive government domination of the public space and virtually all political activity—not just that of Islamists, but of all potential opposition groups. The state controlled mosque construction, sermon content, religious education, and appointment and remuneration of imams. While these constraints were relaxed by the Ennahda government, imams do not have *carte blanche* to speak freely. When several imams delivered uncensored Friday sermons attacking politicians, an official from the Ministry of Religious Affairs stated: “in the event of too many excesses, then measures will be taken. Mosques are not meant to be venues for defamation and personal attacks. An imam is not a judge, and the law is above all.”⁸³ The post-January 2014 interim government has again, at least temporarily, limited mosque openings to prayer times only, claiming that many mosques controlled by Salafist imams were preaching jihad and takfirism (accusing another Muslim of apostasy).⁸⁴

Although Ennahda dominated the elected Constituent Assembly and could theoretically have exerted a decisive influence over the new constitution, the Interim Government adopted the same balanced methodology used to draft the 1959 constitution. Six Constituent Assembly subcommittees focused on various parts of the constitution (e.g., the preamble and basic principles, rights and freedoms, the judiciary, legislative and executive powers, etc.). All Constituent Assembly members served in one or another of these subcommittees, in which membership was proportional to the party distribution in the Assembly. Thus, while Ennahda was well represented, it could not pack critical subcommittees with its own members. Perhaps most critically, Ennahda announced its opposition to including sharia in the constitution; the only reference to Islam repeated the 1959 Constitution's Article 1 and states: “Tunisia is a free, independent and sovereign state. Its religion is Islam, its language is Arabic, and

its type of government is the Republic. This article cannot be amended.”⁸⁵ As mentioned previously, Ennahda has taken further steps to separate secularism and religion in its politics, by officially splitting apart those two functions of the party. Tunisia may well continue upon a road of encouraging secular government while recognizing its population’s Muslim values.

ENDNOTES

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