Tunisia

Quick Facts

Population: 11,721,177 (July 2020 est.)
Area: 163,610 sq km
Ethnic Groups:Arab 98%, European 1%, Jewish and other 1%
GDP (official exchange rate): $39.96 billion (2017 est.)

Source: CIA World FactBook (Last Updated June 2020)

Introduction

Tunisia is perhaps best-known as the site of protests that sparked the 2011 Arab Spring. The ensuing revolution ended the decades-long reign of authoritarian leader Zine el-Abedine Ben Ali (who died in exile in September 2019), thus terminating the restrictive one-party political structure that had been the norm in the country since 1956. Since the revolution, previously suppressed opposition movements, formerly exiled politicians, new political groups, and politicians from the old regime have coexisted in this newly opened field.

The Tunisian government has often been referred to as the only successful democratic transition in the region; one influenced not only by state action, but also civil society. Indeed, while the country's new constitution includes various references to Islam, it also includes sections that outline secular democratic principles. The transition has not been without difficulties, however. The country's economic and security situation has worsened since 2011, as it has faced political assassinations as well as both attempted and successful terrorist attacks. Non-violent Salafism has attracted many, primarily young, people who are frustrated and have become disillusioned with the new post-revolutionary order's failure to improve employment, the economy, and social justice conditions.[1] In part as a result of this ferment, Tunisia has emerged as a major source of foreign fighters that have mobilized to support Islamic extremist groups on the region's battlefields.[2]

Islamist Activity

Political Parties

Hizb Ennahda (The Renaissance Party)

Ennahda is one of the major Tunisian political parties. Founded as the "Movement of Islamic Tendency"

(MTI) in 1981, it was inspired by Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood (MB) and is still considered associated with the Brotherhood, although Ennahda has tried to distance itself from the MB since 2011.[3]

When Prime Minister Zine el-Abedine Ben Ali ousted then-President Habib Bourguiba in a bloodless palace coup in November 1987, he launched a series of reforms that included granting a pardon to MTI founder Rached Ghannouchi, who had been imprisoned under Bourguiba's regime. Ghannouchi, in turn, signed Ben Ali's "National Pact," which was essentially a social contract between the government and civil and political groups.[4] But Ben Ali soon changed course and, among other measures, prohibited any party's name from using the words "Islam" or "Islamic" (the prohibition of religiously-identified parties remains in place to this day). Even though MTI renamed itself Hizb Ennahda, it was not allowed to enter the elections as a recognized political party, and could only field "independent" candidates.

Yet the unexpectedly strong performance of Islamists within the opposition, coupled with Ennahda's increasingly strident political rhetoric, caused the regime to deny the group's second request for recognition. An escalating cycle of protest and repression ensued and Ghannouchi fled, first to Algiers then to Khartoum and finally to London, where he was granted political asylum in 1993.[5] By 1992, virtually all of Ennahda's leadership had been imprisoned and its organizational capabilities within the country were destroyed. Although it was commonly understood that Ennahda had been effectively dismantled by the early 1990s, many Tunisians, including Ben Ali, nonetheless believed the group maintained a "sleeping" presence in the country.[6]

Ennahda's ideology is rooted in Ghannouchi's philosophy, which views the Quran and the Hadith as "an anchor for political thought and practice."[7] However, he appears to contextualize Quranic texts through Western political thinking and freedoms; namely the dignity of human beings, human rights, and Quranic prohibitions against Muslim dictators.[8] Ghannouchi is a "literalist" and believes that it is the duty of Muslims to establish Islamic government where achievable.[9] 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."[10]

However, once in power following the October 2011 elections (during which *Ennahda* secured 90 of the 217 seats in the Tunisian parliament), the Ennahda-led government governed in much the same way as the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood would in Cairo – namely, it seemingly tolerated the disruptive and sometimes violent actions of Salafi elements while cracking down on secular demonstrations. In a widely-cited example of these allegations, 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 April 2012.

The issue came to a head with the assassination of two leftist politicians in 2013, which was widely seen as the work of Salafists emboldened by Ennahda sympathies. Popular demonstrations against the government grew and the "National Salvation Front" – a collective of opposition parties – called for the dissolution of the National Constituent Assembly and new elections. Compounding the situation, the economy at the time was 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 meet the same fate as the Muslim Brotherhood-dominated government of President Mohammed Morsi in Egypt. Various compromises were suggested and Ennahda offered concessions to its political opponents. Popular demonstrations and civil disobedience waned in the fall of 2013, and the two sides negotiated 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.

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. During this time, Ennahda may have been more inclined to encourage pluralism in Muslim politics in order to better govern a politically diverse country.[11] Further, the party indicated that it would accept the outcome of prospective power-sharing. Ghannouchi told 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.[12]

In the October 2014 parliamentary elections, Ennahda gathered 27.79% of the votes, 69 seats in the Assembly, and a junior partnership in a coalition government. The readiness of Essebsi, the newly elected President, and Ghannouchi to compromise and govern together marks the Tunisian government's transition to democracy. Results in subsequent elections have been mixed for Ennahda. The local elections of May 2018 were a victory for the party; it earned 29.68% of the votes behind independent lists and Ennahda's Souad Abderrahim became Tunis's first elected mayor in July 2018. In the September 2019 presidential elections, Ennahda named Abdelfattah Mourou its first ever presidential candidate. However, Mourou did not progress to the second round of voting.

In the past, analysts pointed to ambiguity in the relationship between *Ennahda* and Salafi-*jihadists*, especially in the immediate aftermath of the revolution.[13] However, since 2013, *Ennahda* has acted more decisively against Salafi-*jihadists*. In April 2013, it declared *Ansar al-Sharia*, the largest Salafi group in Tunisia, a terrorist organization.[14] Ennahda has adopted a security-oriented approach to Salafi-*jihadism*, going so far as to force Salafists to register their religious affiliation with the police. While many members of Ennahda are uncomfortable with these measures, as well as with police brutality,[15] the global rise of Salafi-*jihadism* has made it difficult to criticize these policies.[16]

In May 2016, during the group's 10th party congress, 93.5 percent of Ennahda's delegates voted to separate religious and political activities into different branches. Ennahda thus called itself a Muslim Democratic party rather than an Islamic one. This decision means that elected officials can no longer hold positions both in the party and in broader society. That includes mosques and Islamic organizations. Ghannouchi won reelection as party leader and had a major hand in crafting the policy shift that divided *Ennahda*'s social and political wings.[17] For some analysts, this split, which deepened internal divisions, is largely cosmetic and has already experienced setbacks.[18]

Jebahat el-Islah (JI, or "Reform Front") and al-Rahma ("Mercy")

After the revolution ended in 2011, participating in politics rapidly became a fault-line within the Salafi movement.[19] In May 2012, the Tunisian government granted a license to JI 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.[20] JI claims that it rejects violence and supports democratic governance.[21]

While JI remains unswervingly dedicated to bringing *sharia* law into Tunisia, younger Salafi-*jihadis* consider legislating *sharia* unwieldy and unappealing.[22] Furthermore, most JI members are older men as the group has failed to attract younger Tunisians to its cause.[23] In fact, young JI members of the JI ran as independent candidates in past elections.[24] *Al-Rahma*, was legalized in July 2012. Its stated goal is to establish *sharia* law. Like JI, *al-Rahma* is not particularly popular.[25]

Hizb ut-Tahrir (HuT, or the Islamic Liberation Party)

HuT established a presence in Tunisia in 1973, but has historically had only a few dozen members in the country.[26] The group emerged publicly after the 2011 revolution, seeking to offer an "alternative constitution" to the Constituent Assembly, and was officially recognized in 2012.[27] While it claims to renounce violence, HuT does not rule out rebellion and civil disobedience to achieve its goal of establishing an Islamic state. Furthermore, HuT has developed a reputation as a pipeline for radicalization.[28] Many Tunisians believe that, if it seized power, HuT would ban other parties and implement "one man, one vote, one time."[29] Indeed, in April 2017, HuT's politburo chief, Abderraouf Amri, publicly stated that, "Democracy no longer attracts anyone… It is time to announce its death and work to bury it."[30]

In September 2016, the Tunisian government requested that a military court ban HuT, on the grounds that the group had been accused repeatedly of "undermining public order" since 2012.[31] Tunisian judicial authorities implemented a one-month long ban a year after the party successfully appealed the original decision.[32] However, the party continues to operate. HuT held a congress in March 2019, renewing its plea for the creation of a caliphate.[33]

Jihadist Groups

Ansar al-Sharia Tunisiyya (Supporters of Islamic Law, or AST)

Ansar al-Sharia Tunisiyya 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 unified 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."[34]

AST's founder, Saifallah Ben Hassine (also known as Abu Ayyad al-Tunisia), was a *jihadist* who fought in Afghanistan and was subsequently arrested and deported to Tunisia in 2003. He was freed with many other prisoners after the country's 2011 revolution.[35] AST has claimed responsibility for the 2012 attack on the U.S. Embassy in Tunis, and the assassinations of liberal politicians, Chokri Belaid and Mohamed Brahmi, in February and July 2013.[36] Its most recent attack occurred in 2014, AST militants attacked Tunisian soldiers at checkpoints near the Algerian border. Fourteen people were killed in that incident.[37]

AST has also devoted energy to *dawa* (proselytization) and community service.[38] In this manner, AST has entrenched itself and won support in a nation that feels abandoned by political elites and disappointed in the outcome of the 2011 revolution.[39] In 2013, AST was designated as a terrorist organization, which limited its ability to publicly proselytize.[40]

In July 2014, an AST spokesman declared the group's allegiance to Islamic State in Syria and Levant (ISIS/ISIL) *emir* Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi.[41] AST has recruited heavily for ISIS in Tunisia and encourages many young Tunisians to make the journey to Syria.[42]. The State Department's 2016 report on terrorist groups indicated that AST's strength and numbers, as well as its foreign aid and financing, remain unknown, although analysts agree that its capacities have decreased over time.[43] More recent reports suggest that AST has disbanded and its members have joined other groups.[44] In February 2019, French forces around *El Aklé, Mali, c*laimed to have killed Seifallah Ben Hassine, one of the founders of AST.[45]

Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)

AQIM only established an active recruiting base in Tunisia comparatively recently. After the fall of Ben Ali, the Okba Ibn Nafaâ brigade was created and supported by Abdelmalek Droukdal (a.k.a. Abu Mossab Abdel Wadoud, the supreme leader of AQIM). According to a Tunisian official, the brigade has never had more than 200-300 men and operates through networks and cells.[46]

AQIM has not carried out suicide bomb-type terrorist operations in Tunisia; however, its "conventional" forces, armed with weapons looted from Libyan arsenals, have fought Tunisian security forces in the past. In 2014, AQIM claimed responsibility for an attack on the home of interior minister, Lotfi Ben Jeddou.[47] Okba Ibn Nafaâ is also responsible for the March 2015 Bardo museum attack, although the incident was claimed by ISIS. AQIM has historically considered Tunisia as a support zone and employs more defensive operations than offensive strikes.[48]

The group has been weakened in recent years. Some AQIM members have defected to ISIS and ISIS has co-opted some of AQIM's support cells along Tunisia's border with Algeria, taking supplies for themselves.[49] In 2015, Tunisian counterterrorism operations eliminated much of the group's leadership. Subsequently, in 2017, the group's leader, Murad Sha'ib, was killed, and a year later, on January 2018, his successor, Bilal Kobi, was also eliminated.[50] The group's activity in Tunisia has radically diminished since then.[51]

The Islamic State in Syria and Levant

As mentioned above, ISIS' growth in Tunisia partly derives from defections from AST and Okba Ibn Nafaâ. ISIS also features Tunisians prominently in its own propaganda, often lauding the efforts and martyrdom of Tunisian foreign fighters.[52] The main ISIS affiliated organization in Tunisia is known as Jund Al Khilafa (Soldiers of the Caliph).[53] 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 12 presidential guards.[54] 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.[55] In November 2016, the Islamic State claimed responsibility for killing a Tunisian Air Force soldier who was found dead in his home.[56] In June 2019, two suicide attacks targeted police forces. ISIS claimed responsibility through its Amaq News Agency.[57] *Jund Al Khilafa* remains active to this day, although it is less impactful. Its latest attacks have been against military targets and have been mainly concentrated in the Western part of Tunisia.[58]

The main threat, arguably, does not come from local organizations, but rather from foreign fighters.[59] Between 3,000 and 7,000 of ISIS's foreign fighters come from Tunisia, according to various sources.[60] While not all of those people fought on behalf of ISIS, most eventually changed allegiances. Over time, however, these allegiances have proved fluid; many have moved to the south of the Sahel, seeking to continue their fight.[61] Recent reports highlight the increasing number of fighters that have now become associated with AQIM and its branches.[62]

Islamism and Society

Ninety-eight percent of Tunisia's 11 million person population is Sunni Muslim.[63] Shi'ites number perhaps in the thousands, and most converted to the sect after the 1979 Iranian Revolution.[64] 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 back then, and there were no violent purges. This trend has largely continued; Tunisian society is not used to violent extremism and has demonstrated its unity in condemning it. After the 2013 murder of politician Chokri Belaid, one million people participated in the "country's biggest demonstrations since the 2011 revolution" to protest the killing.[65] However, the sense that the revolution has not fulfilled all expectations and the lack of opportunities for the youth, in particular from poorer southern interior regions, have challenged this unity

and made violent extremism more attractive for some disenfranchised segments of the population.

Islamism and the State

The Tunisian state was hostile to Islamism from its independence in 1956 through to the end of the Ben Ali regime in 2011. Habib Bourguiba, the hero of Tunisian liberation and president for over 30 years, 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.[66] When the regime's social and economic development failed, it adapted and instituted programs focused on public education and literacy, economic mobility, and the position of women in society.

The 2003 anti-terrorism law allowed the government to jail anyone threatening national security, though it primarily targeted Islamist-leaning young people using the Internet "illegally" (i.e., blogging or visiting *jihadist* websites).[67] At the same time, the Ben Ali regime used religion to support government policies.[68] This state-facilitated 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.[69] The state also controlled mosque construction, sermon content, religious education, and appointment and remuneration of imams.

There were heated debates in the process of drafting the 2014 Constitution between Islamic political groups and secular movements over the role of Islamic law in the Tunisian Constitution, the prohibition of blasphemy, and the rights of women. However, Islamic groups showed self-restraint overall.[70] *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."[71] However, the document includes language that outlines the primacy of civil law as referenced in Article 2, as well as the freedom of conscience, the values of moderation and tolerance, and commitments to peace and stability, per Article 6.[72]

The state of Tunisia has vigorously fought against violent extremism over the last several years at the encouragement of foreign partners. While the Ministry of Religious Affairs has claimed that it has regained control over mosques controlled by Salafi groups, the 2017 National Risk Assessment (NRA) shows that terrorist groups have been backed through "non-profitable organizations, mosques, and smuggling."[73] When 10kg of explosive substances were found in a mosque near Tunis in July 2019, the subsequent seizure reflected the government's difficulty in controlling the estimated 5000 mosques around the country. [74]

Despite a heated debate on reintegration vs. punitive measures to deal with the estimated 1000 *jihadists* that have returned to Tunisia and the adoption of the National Strategy for Counter Terrorism in 2016 that promotes a holistic approach, the estimated 1000 people that have returned to Tunisia from fighting for *jihadist* causes abroad[75] are largely considered a security threat, leading to repressive policies.[76] Such a strategy is problematic in that "[t]he country's overcrowded prisons continue to serve as a breeding ground for *jihadists*."[77] The country's subsequent 2015 anti-terrorism law expanded the definition of terrorism and offered a legislative basis to suspend civic associations and reinforce social controls.[78] The result has been a constriction of civil society. Between 2014 and 2017, around "150 civil associations [were] suspended and 157 closed for alleged links to terrorism."[79] The Ministry of Religious Affairs has likewise enforced new administrative measures to "register and monitor religious institutions and their workers, including preachers, and to impose fixed opening hours," in addition to the closure of mosques outside their supervision.[80] More recently, in July 2019, Tunisian authorities also banned the wearing of the *niqab* in public institutions, justifying the measure on the basis of security concerns, as a response to a June 2019

terrorist attack that targeted security forces in the center of Tunis.

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