

# American Foreign Policy Council

## TUNISIA

### QUICK FACTS

Population: 10,937,521

Area: 163,610 sq km

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

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

Government Type: Republic

GDP (official exchange rate): \$108.4 billion

Map and Quick Facts courtesy of the CIA World Factbook (Last Updated June 2014)



*The unprecedented social and political upheaval in Tunisia that began in December 2010, causing long-serving President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali and his family to quit the country roughly a month later, continues to drive events and developments in the North African state. The so-called “Jasmine Revolution” was unexpected to Tunisian Islamists, as it was to all Tunisians and the international community at large. The revolt itself contained little overt involvement of Islamic groups and very little Islamist rhetoric. It did, however, destroy the one-party structure that had defined political life since the country’s independence in 1956, and it prompted the re-emergence of thoroughly suppressed opposition movements, the return of politicians from exile, and the creation of many new political groupings. Tunisian political Islamists, as represented primarily by the An-Nahda Party, have scored major political gains, although not without difficulties and setbacks.*

*An-Nahda was the major winner of the October 2011 parliamentary election, and controls almost half of the 217 seats in the Constituent Assembly. Between December 2011 and January 2014, an An-Nahda 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 An-Nahda'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 attempted and actual terrorism. 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*<sup>1</sup>

## ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

### *An-Nahda*

The Islamist movement in Tunisia has long been embodied by Hizb an-Nahda (The Renaissance Party), which was thoroughly suppressed by the Ben Ali regime but became a legal party in early March 2011. Its leader, Rachid al-Ghannouchi, in exile in London since 1989, returned to Tunis shortly after Ben Ali's January 14, 2011 abdication to a tumultuous airport welcome, and the party quickly and effectively re-established its domestic organization. Despite the emergence of other Islamist groups since the "Jasmine Revolution," An-Nahda has continued to dominate the Islamist movement in the new era.

The origin of Tunisia's modern Islamist movement was the Quranic Preservation Society, which was formed in 1970 with government approval as a counterweight to the country's political left.<sup>2</sup> It was apolitical, dedicated primarily to encouraging piety and faithfulness. The 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.<sup>3</sup> 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 then-President Habib Bourguiba's one-party rule.<sup>4</sup> In 1978, a year that saw serious economic-based rioting across the country, the "Movement of Islamic Renewal" emerged as a loose coalition of Islamist groups; by the following year, Ghannouchi's group, then called the *Mouvement de la Tendance Islamique* (MTI), emerged as its backbone.<sup>5</sup>

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.”<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> During 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.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup>

In November 1987, Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, whom President Bourguiba had recently appointed Prime Minister, ousted him in a bloodless 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”—essentially a social contract between the government and civil and political groups—and sought to run a list of candidates in the 1989 legislative elections.<sup>10</sup> 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 overtly religiously-identified parties remains in place today). The MTI duly renamed itself *Hizb an-Nahda*, the Renaissance Party. However, Ben Ali still refused to allow it 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<sup>11</sup>). The ruling Constitutional Democratic Rally 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 An-Nahda’s increasingly strident political rhetoric, caused the regime to deny An-Nahda’s second request for recognition. An escalating cycle of protest and repression ensued, and Ghannouchi fled to London in 1989.<sup>12</sup> By 1992, virtually all of An-Nahda’s leadership was imprisoned and its organizational capabilities within the country destroyed. Although it was commonly understood that An-Nahda 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.<sup>13</sup> This remained the situation until January 2011.

An-Nahda’s ideology is thoroughly rooted in the ideology of its founder Ghannouchi, who views the Koran and the Hadith as “an anchor for political thought and practice.”<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup>

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.”<sup>17</sup> He considers the parliamentary system a legitimate means of political participation.<sup>18</sup> 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.”<sup>19</sup> Ghannouchi went on to further explain his views: while Islam has never known the separation between religion and the state, he rejected the use of the state apparatus to impose religion, citing the Prophet Mohammed’s view that religion is one realm and everyday governing is another. When states have tried to impose one brand of Islam on the populace, revolution has occurred: “there is no value to any religious observance that is motivated through coercion.” Applying his views to the political situation in Tunisia, 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.”<sup>20</sup> Ghannouchi’s public statements and the actions of the party have been consistent with this pluralism, as demonstrated by the party’s willingness to surrender the reins of government.

Once in power following the October 2011 elections, however, the An-Nahdalded 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, as did the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. At the same time, the government was seen as tolerating the disruptive and sometimes violent actions of the Salafists while cracking down on secular demonstrations. In a widely-cited example of the security forces’ alleged favoritism toward the Islamists, the police allowed the Salafist “occupation” of Manouba University to drag on for several weeks, but quickly used force to break up peaceful anti-An-Nahda demonstrations in central Tunis in April 2012.

The issue came to a head with the assassination of two leftist politicians in 2013, widely seen as the work of Salafists emboldened by An-Nahda sympathies. Popular demonstrations against the government grew. Opposition parties, which coalesced as the “National Salvation Front” called for the dissolution of the National Constituent Assembly and for new elections. Also, the process of writing the constitution was dragging, the economy was still far from robust, and the social environment was one of public frustration and pessimism. An-Nahda leaders realized that some sort of compromise was necessary or else they would go the way of the Muslim Brotherhood and President Morsi in Egypt, although not by the hands of the army. Various compromises were suggested, and An-Nahda offered some concessions. Although

popular demonstrations and civil disobedience waned in Fall 2013, the two sides decided to negotiate a way forward.<sup>21</sup> Finally, a National Dialogue led by Tunisia's labor union federation brokered a compromise in early January 2014: the An-Nahda-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, and by the end of January, the new constitution was drafted and approved by the Constituent Assembly. Serious unrest was avoided, the new constitution is widely accepted, and the country is moving ahead. An-Nahda will surely participate in the next elections and will likely do quite well. Based on the leadership's statements, there is also much reason to believe that An-Nahda will accept the outcome even if the party does not do well. Speaking at a February 25, 2014 conference in Washington, D.C., Ghannouchi stated:

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.<sup>22</sup>

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.<sup>23</sup>

### *Other Islamist movements*

While An-Nahda dominates Tunisian Islamism, other 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 "Reform Front" (*Jebhat el-Islah*) 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 so recognized.<sup>24</sup> *Islah*, several of whose leaders were jailed during the 1980s, claims that it rejects violence, respects democracy, and does not seek to impose Islamic codes on dress or personal conduct.<sup>25</sup> A second Salafist party, *Al-Rahma* ("Mercy") was legalized in July 2012. Its stated goal is the establishment of *sharia* law. Neither *Rahma* nor *Islah* are particularly popular.<sup>26</sup>

*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."<sup>27</sup>

*Ansar al-Shariah Tunisiyya (Supporters of Islamic Law) (AST).* Ansar al-Sharia was established in April 2011. Its 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.<sup>28</sup> Most of the post-revolutionary violence — including a 2012 attack on the U.S. Embassy and the assassinations of liberal politicians Chokri Belaid and Mohamed Brahmî in February and July 2013 — has been attributed to AST, and the organization has been labeled a terrorist organization by the An-Nahda-led government. However, despite its open advocacy of *jihad* and violence, AST has not claimed responsibility for any violent acts, and some observers question the government’s “rush to judgment.”<sup>29</sup>

Another potentially dangerous group is *Hizb ut-Tahrir* (the Islamic Liberation Party), an international group founded in 1953 that seeks to re-establish the Islamic Caliphate. This group established a presence in Tunisia in 1973, but had only a few dozen members in the country.<sup>30</sup> It has now emerged publicly and stated its goal of competing in elections and offering its “alternative constitution” to the Constituent Assembly.<sup>31</sup> 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.<sup>32</sup> Its spokesman announced that *Hizb ut-Tahrir* is preparing for an ideological and political struggle to save the nation.<sup>33</sup> Many Tunisians, including members of An-Nahda, 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.”<sup>34</sup> Its request for a license to operate as a political party was denied on March 12, 2012 (as was that of the “Tunisian Sunni” party), and it will be interesting to observe what direction this organization will take.

*Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb* (AQIM), which did not have a significant presence or recruiting base in Tunisia, 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. AQIM represents a serious national security threat, and both the army and the security forces are conducting tactical operations against the group.

## ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

Tunisians tend to be moderate in their views and behavior, a characteristic that inhibits the ability of Islamists to exploit the socio-political situation. The course of Tunisian development has not been characterized by social polarization or identity politics, both of which can spawn radical action. Tunisia’s colonial and liberation experiences were not marked by extensive violence. Bourguiba, supported by the public, set a moderate course at the very inception of the independence movement and followed through after the French left the region. 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 the population is Sunni Muslim.<sup>35</sup> Shi'ites number perhaps in the thousands, mostly converts following the 1979 Iranian Revolution.<sup>36</sup> 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 been a focus of development. Most dissident movements, including the Islamists, 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.<sup>37</sup>

But relative prosperity was insufficient to prevent upheaval; the revolution was not about bread and jobs alone, but about dignity and the state's relationship with the people. A stroll along Avenue Habib Bourguiba in downtown Tunis has long revealed 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 is 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.<sup>38</sup> Some of these radical *imams* are calling young Tunisians to *jihad* against the Syrian regime of Bashar Assad, something of great interest to the Interior Ministry.<sup>39</sup> The Interior Ministry believes the number of Tunisian fighters in Syria is nearly 5,000 (almost certainly inflated), while many more have been prevented from going. Of major concern is the return of those fighters to Tunisia. The Interior Ministry estimates that 400 have returned. The government has yet to identify a clear strategy for dealing with them and reintegrating them into society "so they don't turn into time bombs that may explode any moment."<sup>40</sup> The young unemployed men are still hanging around Avenue Bourguiba, and while their mood is more positive since January of 2011, how long it remains so will depend on how the new order chooses to address their problems.

While Islamism has not, and most likely will not, take hold among Tunisians en masse, religious sentiment was growing steadily prior to the "Jasmine Revolution." Youth were exposed to this phenomenon primarily at university, especially when sec-

ular, 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, 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.<sup>41</sup> This “Official” or “Popular” Islam was designed to counter the extremist/terrorist threat by preaching the values of moderation and tolerance and, at the same time, claiming Tunisians’ Islamic identity, which had been denied by past regimes.<sup>42</sup> 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 An-Nahda 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.<sup>43</sup> Many of those who join the movement do not necessarily support the establishment of an Islamic regime.<sup>44</sup>

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 will have to preserve and improve these values, and not reject or destroy them. Therefore, a call for an “Islamic Republic” will have little standing in Tunisia. Most Islamists realize this, which is why An-Nahda moderated its discourse and its strategy to cope with the moderate nature and modern expectations of Tunisian society.<sup>45</sup>

For An-Nahda to succeed in political life over the long term, it must accept the framework of the national state, agree to safeguard the Tunisian tradition of modernization, and adopt progressive attitudes toward Tunisia’s Arab and Islamic identities.<sup>46</sup> An-Nahda, like other heretofore suppressed opposition groups, now must sell its message to a public suddenly enjoying a plethora of alternatives and concerned mostly with jobs, the economy, and social justice. Freedom of expression is widely exercised in the “new Tunisia,” and that includes vigorous and impassioned debates about the role of religion in society, a subject that was taboo under the old regime. It is clear that many more people are expressing their religiosity through speech, dress, and conduct, but this expression remains personal. This most likely reflects the fact that many people are now “out of the closet” religiously, and not necessarily that more people are being attracted to political Islam and particularly to Salafism.<sup>47</sup>



## 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'état* 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.<sup>48</sup> 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).<sup>49</sup>

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 An-Nahda 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.”<sup>50</sup> 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).<sup>51</sup>

Although An-Nahda 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 An-Nahda was well represented, it could not pack critical subcommittees with its own members. Perhaps most critically, An-Nahda 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."<sup>52</sup>

This has done much to reassure the public, but there is an underlying concern among Tunisian liberals that the Islamists have a "slow but sure" project to impose their values and practices.

While the "Jasmine Revolution" has shaken off the old regime and Tunisians are now free to practice and express their religious beliefs, they have not rejected the essentially secular nature of the state and the society and in general are not predisposed to political Islamism. It is clear that it would not at all be easy for Islamists to hijack the revolution outside the electoral process. Islamism's future fortunes and its position in the new political order will rest on its ability to offer the citizens both a compelling vision of Tunisia's economic, political, and social future and a respect for Tunisia's heritage.

## ENDNOTES

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