

## Ennahda's Past, Present, and Future: Anne Wolf Discusses Her Book *Political Islam in Tunisia*

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*More than eight years after the end of Ben Ali's dictatorship, Ennahda remains one of Tunisia's most important political and social movements, and it may be the party to beat in the fall 2019 elections. POMED Nonresident Fellow Anne Wolf, the author of the 2017 book, **Political Islam in Tunisia: The History of Ennahda**, talked with POMED's Deputy Director for Research Amy Hawthorne about her work on the group. In this Q&A, Dr. Wolf explains why Ennahda did not radicalize despite intense repression under Ben Ali, the current state of relations between Ennahda and secular groups, and why she believes Ennahda—and Tunisia—are not yet models for the rest of the region.*

**POMED:** What were some of the challenges you faced in researching this book?

**Anne Wolf:** Before the 2011 revolution, researching Ennahda was extremely challenging because of the difficulty of obtaining information about the movement, which was illegal and heavily repressed in Tunisia, and of gaining access to its members. After the fall of the Ben Ali regime, I faced the converse challenge: I acquired so much data on Ennahda that it took me more than five years to organize and critically evaluate it. I was the first researcher to conduct a very wide range of interviews with Ennahda. I interviewed more than 400 members and acquired a great deal of archival material. I quickly learned that Ennahda is much more than the politics and ideological outlook of its leadership: Ennahda is about the lived experiences and histories of all its members, be they neighborhood activists, mid-level officials, or students. Their activities and visions for the movement are diverse.

I was very lucky to have been in Tunisia in 2011 and 2012, which was the best time to conduct research on Ennahda. Many members, from the leadership to the rank and file, felt for the first time free to talk about their experiences of exile and prison. Indeed, after decades of dictatorship, there was a real thirst among Ennahda activists to finally speak the truth about

their movement and some darker aspects of its history. In later years, once Ennahda became a more organized and disciplined actor, what my interviewees said to me more often was guarded and influenced by political considerations.

### What research findings surprised you?

One of my most surprising discoveries, early on in my research, was that Ennahda's longtime leader, Rached Ghannouchi, is actually not as popular within the movement as I thought he would be. Ghannouchi is one of Ennahda's founders and its most important figurehead; he received international acclaim for his writings on Islam and democracy. Within some Islamist circles he enjoys an almost mythical status; he appears untouchable. I expected this to be the same within the movement, but to my surprise this wasn't the case. For sure, Ghannouchi has an important base within Ennahda, but some party activists are also openly critical of his politics and are not shy to state that they favor another leader. Some prefer Ali Larayedh or Hamadi Jebali, who are also very moderate figures but spent the years of repression during the Ben Ali regime in prison, not in exile like Ghannouchi. I found it astonishing that Ennahda activists felt so free to voice their criticisms of the leadership. I believe this is reassuring given the long tradition of personality cults in Tunisian politics. That activists feel free to criticize their own leaders is a sign of healthy politics, not only within Ennahda but across Tunisia's emerging democracy as a whole.

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### Your book challenges the myths that Tunisia has a long and deeply entrenched "secular" tradition and that, as a religious movement, Ennahda is an outlier to this supposed secularism.

Yes, I argue that the very opposite is true: those institutions and practices that are often cited as examples of Tunisia's "secular" legacy emerged amid a deeply religious society and were strongly influenced by it. They include Tunisia's Neo-Destour Party, which led the fight for independence and later, as the ruling party of President Habib Bourguiba, implemented a wide-ranging modernization program. The Neo-Destour emerged out of the Destour (Constitution) party, which was co-founded in 1920 by Abdelaziz Thaalbi, a sheikh from the University of Ez-Zitouna, at the time the main institution of Islamic learning in Tunisia and the broader Maghreb region. Moreover, during the struggle for independence, the Neo-Destour itself was split between Habib Bourguiba, who enjoyed close ties to France, and Salah ben Youssef, who was close to the Zitouna establishment and more religiously conservative. Like many Tunisians at that time, Ben Youssef was influenced by pan-Islamic and Arab nationalist ideas. While in Egypt Arab nationalism evolved in opposition to Islamist ideas, this was not the case in Tunisia. Religiously observant Tunisians overwhelmingly embraced Arab nationalism, through which they sought to express their Islamic faith and to counter the influence of France.

The leadership battle between Bourguiba, who became Tunisia's first president, and Ben Youssef only ceased when the latter was assassinated in 1961. But their conflict reflected deeper tensions within Tunisian society, which became even more pronounced once Bourguiba pursued his wide-ranging modernization reforms. Many sections of society felt alienated by the reforms, and this provided the backdrop for the growth of religious activism as a form of national resistance. From this broad revival of religious activism emerged the movement that later became Ennahda.

I found that Ennahda rose in the 1960s and 1970s at the very heart of a conflicted society in which many people felt alienated by the westernization reforms launched by Bourguiba. Initially, religious activists organized as a loose "Islamic Group," which in 1979 became the Islamic Tendency Movement (MTI) before being renamed Ennahda in 1989. Islamic Group activists were mostly concerned with reviving religion in the public sphere. They adopted a more political agenda only in the late 1970s and 1980s, in part as a reaction to the state repression they faced at the time. Religious activists sought to counter state violence by becoming more politically active, so they applied for a license to operate as a political party, but the authorities rejected their demand. The religious movement also became prominent on Tunisian university campuses, which were highly politicized, as many observant students were influenced by the Iranian Revolution.

None of this is to play down the importance some secular traditions have gained in Tunisia, such as in the realms of family law and education. But Ennahda has come to embrace them. For instance, Ennahda has accepted Tunisia's Personal Status Code, a legal milestone protecting women's rights. Of course, there are ideological and religious differences between Ennahda and, let's say, the Nidaa Tounes party, one of its main political competitors, which includes many Ben Ali-era officials. But these differences are of degree, not fundamental character: Nidaa Tounes is not as "secular" as it is often depicted in the west, while Ennahda is not as religiously conservative. For example, President Beji Caid Essebsi, Nidaa Tounes's co-founder, and other party leaders also resort to Islamic precepts to justify their policies and regularly participate in religious ceremonies and events, [including at the University of Ez-Zitouna](#); they themselves reject the "secular" label they often receive in the West. Even more counterintuitively, Ennahda has more women in leadership positions than does Nidaa Tounes, even though Nidaa Tounes activists assert that they are the ones championing the fight for gender equality.

NIDAA TOUNES IS NOT AS "SECULAR" AS IT IS OFTEN DEPICTED IN THE WEST, WHILE ENNAHDA IS NOT AS RELIGIOUSLY CONSERVATIVE.

Your research suggests that anger over severe repression radicalized a small number of MTI and Ennahda followers, but did not lead to the radicalization of the Ennahda movement as a whole. Why not, in your view?

In the mid-1980s, at the height of Bourguiba's repression of the Islamist movement, a faction within the MTI chose a more confrontational approach towards the regime. At that time several MTI leaders were incarcerated, including Ghannouchi, and Bourguiba even threatened to execute them. To counter the state repression, a group of MTI activists created a secret military wing known as the "Security Group," which sought to topple the Bourguiba regime. In November 1987, however, a rival faction from within the regime staged a coup d'état against Bourguiba, bringing Ben Ali to power. Two years later, Ben Ali began his own crackdown on Ennahda, his main political opponent, imprisoning thousands of its members. At the height of the repression, some activists of the Security Group again plotted to overthrow the regime. However, they failed to organize because Ennahda had been substantially weakened; the entire leadership was either imprisoned or in exile. It was in this context that a few young Tunisians with links to Ennahda tried to take matters into their own hands. In February 1991, a group of youthful activists burned the office of Ben Ali's ruling party in Bab Souika, a neighborhood in downtown Tunis. One of the guards died in the fire. It remains unclear if the perpetrators knew that guards were inside the building when they set it aflame.

It is important to highlight that the Bab Souika affair was extremely controversial within Ennahda, and some members even split from the organization following the incident. Indeed, the use of violence was rejected by the vast majority of Ennahda activists, even at the height of Ben Ali's crackdown. The prevailing opinion among Ennahda activists was that Bab Souika was deeply detrimental to their movement: it tarnished their reputation and fed into Ben Ali's discourse that Ennahda was violent, giving him an excuse to reinforce his repression of Islamist activists. Thus, far from state repression radicalizing the wider movement, the Bab Souika affair confirmed the overwhelming moderation of Ennahda followers.

### What in your view has been Ennahda's biggest mistake since 2011? What has been its best decision?

For a short period after the 2011 revolution, Ennahda leaders sought cooperation with the more conservative Salafis, who had gained influence among the conservative youth in the 1990s and 2000s, when many Ennahda activists were imprisoned or exiled. Ennahda officials insisted that they did not want to commit the same mistake as Ben Ali had made with Ennahda by cracking down on a movement that is largely peaceful—most Salafis focus only on preaching and proselytizing Islam—and they sought to pull them into the democratic frame. However, during this early period, Ennahda leaders also turned a blind eye to many Salafi incidents that should not have gone unpunished. For example, in June 2012, **Salafis attacked an art exhibition** in the La Marsa suburb of Tunis that they considered blasphemous, but the Ennahda-led government failed to take harsh measures against them. Only three months later, in September 2012, **hundreds of Salafi protesters attacked the U.S. embassy in Tunis** over a film depicting the Prophet Muhammed in a manner that many Muslims found highly offensive; the incident left two people dead. Once Ennahda leaders realized that they had underestimated the Salafis and that the ultraconservatives constituted a real security threat, they totally reversed their approach. They adopted a security response against any perpetrators of violence, a stance that also is controversial as it may lead to increased radicalization in the Salafi movement.

Nevertheless, the failure of Ennahda leaders to distinguish themselves more clearly from the Salafis early on, and their decision to turn a blind eye to some Salafi agitation, considerably damaged their image in the eyes of other political forces. Ennahda is still recovering from this today. Of course, this is Ennahda's first experience in politics and its leaders have learned from their mistakes. Indeed, Ennahda's main strength has been that it has sought cooperation with a large range of political actors. One of Ennahda's best decisions, after it emerged as the largest force in the 2011 parliamentary elections, was to collaborate with two leftist parties to form the "Troika government" and not to dominate politics single-handedly—in sharp contrast to how the Muslim Brotherhood behaved in Egypt when it was in power in 2012–13. Ennahda pursued the same reconciliatory strategy following the 2014 elections, **when it joined the unity government formed by Nidaa Tounes**.

I particularly laud Ennahda's decision to distinguish itself clearly from other Islamist movements in the region in order to pursue a truly Tunisian approach to Islam and democracy.

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When the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood emerged as the largest political force in post-Mubarak Egypt, **Rached Ghannouchi urged the group to share power with parties**. And in 2013, when opposition to the Troika government mounted following the assassination of two leftist politicians, Ennahda leaders agreed to cede power to a caretaker government. Time and again, Ennahda has demonstrated its unique approach to governance and its conviction that Islam and democracy are not only compatible but that their combination can yield stable and inclusive politics.

**What has led to Ennahda's current tensions with President Essebsi? After all, Essebsi legalized the movement in 2011 and agreed that Ennahda and Nidaa Tounes should cohabitate in government after the 2014 election.**

At the outset, it is important to note that the alliance between Nidaa Tounes and Ennahda has always been an alliance of necessity and political strategy, and thus is fragile. It has never been an alliance of love or admiration. In March 2011, when serving as interim prime minister, Essebsi presided over Ennahda's legalization. This move came as part of the legalization of a wide range of opposition forces that had been criminalized under Ben Ali. It came within a highly revolutionary context. We must not forget that Essebsi's predecessor as interim prime minister, Mohamed Ghannouchi, had failed to garner support for his national unity government as it did not live up to the revolutionary demands of the people. Essebsi did not want to suffer the same fate and was therefore more reform-minded. But he did not harbor any personal sympathy toward the Islamist movement. In 2012, he co-founded Nidaa Tounes with two principal objectives in mind: to stem the influence of Ennahda and, relatedly, to guarantee a political future for former regime officials, including for himself, in the new Tunisia.

During the 2014 electoral campaign, Nidaa Tounes's key strategy was to stoke fear about political Islam, and its leaders promised to counter Ennahda once they were elected to parliament. Naturally, Nidaa Tounes's subsequent formation of a union government that included Ennahda—its proclaimed archenemy—was a major blow to its support base. Nidaa Tounes voters felt fooled, and even some Nidaa Tounes lawmakers decided to resign from the party due to its failure to live up to its principal electoral promise.

Ennahda lawmakers took advantage of these frictions to portray themselves as a moderate and reliable partner in politics; they sought to show that they were willing to work with everybody, including parties that are openly hostile toward the Islamists. As tensions within Nidaa Tounes persisted, a mounting number of parliamentarians resigned, in part because of the coalition with Ennahda, but also because of the increasing prominence of Essebsi's controversial son, Hamed, within the party, which made Nidaa Tounes look like a family project. By January 2016, Ennahda had become once again the **largest force in parliament**.

In September 2018 Essebsi **announced** on television that “the consensus and relationship between me and Ennahda has ended, after they chose to form another relationship with [Prime Minister] Youssef Chahed.” Subsequently, Essebsi even called for an **investigation** into Ennahda, a move that evokes the actions of the Ben Ali regime. Essebsi's turn against Ennahda is personal: he seeks revenge for Ennahda's support for Chahed. His stance also likely is influenced by electoral considerations for this fall, given that anti-Islamism was the major rallying factor for Nidaa in 2014. However, the anti-Islamist stance of Essebsi and Nidaa Tounes is likely to be

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less credible in the 2019 elections in light of Nidaa Tounes's own cooperation with Ennahda in government as well as Ennahda's track record of political moderation. There is even some irony in the persistent attempts of Nidaa Tounes activists to link Ennahda to violence. Tunisia under Ben Ali was a repressive and violent regime. Former officials of the Ben Ali regime, many of whom joined Nidaa Tounes, participated in this repressive system, either directly or indirectly, including Essebsi himself. Yet instead of revenge and punishment, Ennahda's own strategy towards them has been one of reconciliation.

### How would you assess the chances of a new wave of repression against Ennahda?

As long as anti-Islamism provides a rallying point for key political parties in Tunisia, repression against Ennahda remains a real possibility. Alongside Nidaa Tounes, Tunisia's leftist Popular Front coalition has repeatedly tried to link Ennahda to terrorism. Its members accuse the Ennahda government of direct responsibility for the 2013 assassinations of two leftist opposition politicians, Chokri Belaid and Mohamed Brahmi, even though there is no evidence backing up this allegation. Indeed, subsequent governments were also not immune to terrorist attacks, and the worst terrorist incidents since 2011 occurred under the presidency of Essebsi and the unity government formed by Nidaa Tounes. However, though subsequent governments did not fare better in fighting extremist violence, Nidaa Tounes and the Popular Front have continued to focus their blame solely on Ennahda. The Front requested **an official judicial inquiry** into Ennahda and whether it maintains a secret security wing, with the goal of criminalizing the movement. Although the judiciary has yet to find sufficient evidence to open a formal inquiry, the fact that Essebsi has come to back such an investigation underlines how real the threat of repression against Ennahda remains. Ennahda's future is dependent on the sound and impartial functioning of the judiciary and other state institutions and their ability to weather any political pressure.

### In the book's conclusion, you make an interesting comment that "what the uprisings have achieved in Tunisia is not yet an example for other countries in the region." Why do you think Tunisia is not yet an example?

The 2010–11 uprising erupted in response to unemployment and poverty, along with police repression and authoritarian politics, problems that plague much of the Arab world. Clearly Tunisia's biggest achievement since 2011 has been the remarkable progress toward democracy. But in socioeconomic terms, the situation is even worse than before. In 2010, 23 percent of university graduates were without a job; **today the figure is almost 30 percent**. Of course, we cannot expect all problems to be solved at once, especially at a time of such vast political transformation. But we must still ask ourselves: have successive Tunisian governments since 2011 done their utmost to counter unemployment, poverty, and the marginalization of interior regions? Has Ennahda done so? I don't think so. Indeed, the efforts of political leaders have focused on austerity when, arguably, the fight against corruption would have had more beneficial effects on the economy, especially in the long term. But last year, two-thirds of ministers, parliamentarians, and senior public servants, including from Ennahda, **did not declare their assets**, even though they are legally obliged to do so. In my opinion Ennahda should have done much more to secure the moral high ground here and set an example on financial transparency and the fight against corruption.

**TUNISIA'S BIGGEST ACHIEVEMENT SINCE 2011 HAS BEEN THE REMARKABLE PROGRESS TOWARD DEMOCRACY. BUT IN SOCIOECONOMIC TERMS, THE SITUATION IS EVEN WORSE THAN BEFORE.**

Of course, the challenges of corruption and unemployment are not unique to Tunisia. Youth unemployment in particular is a massive problem throughout the region. But Tunisia has the opportunity to use the new tools available in the democratic environment to uncover vast networks of corruption, and to make sure that key representatives of the state and government commit to financial transparency. Economic justice was one of the main demands of the uprisings, but its realization seems more elusive than ever. In this regard, Tunisia is not yet a model for other Arab countries.

### Why do you think Ennahda has not taken a stronger stance on fighting corruption?

The fight against corruption is extremely challenging. Any political actor seeking to uncover Tunisia's longstanding networks of corruption and nepotism is bound to create many powerful enemies, and that is exactly what Ennahda has been trying to avoid over the past years, especially given its history of prison and exile. A key concern of Rached Ghannouchi and other Ennahda leaders has been to prevent another wave of repression against their movement. They embarked upon political compromise and reconciliation, including with former members of the Ben Ali regime, in part to shield themselves from their former archenemies. Indeed, Ennahda leaders even supported the controversial Administrative Reconciliation law, passed by parliament in September 2017, which offers conditional amnesty to corrupt officials of the Ben Ali regime, effectively rehabilitating them.

A KEY CONCERN OF RACHED GHANNOUCHI AND OTHER ENNAHDA LEADERS HAS BEEN TO PREVENT ANOTHER WAVE OF REPRESSION AGAINST THEIR MOVEMENT.

The Ennahda leadership's rapprochement with Ben Ali-era officials is deeply controversial within the movement itself. In 2013 a youthful Ennahda member told me she deeply deplored that Ghannouchi's discourse had shifted from denouncing Tunisia's corrupt economic elite to calling upon Ennahda followers to "pray" for Tunisia's businessmen. Naturally, not all Tunisian entrepreneurs had corrupt links to the Ben Ali regime. But Ennahda's fraternization with the business elite has alienated some followers who believed in the party's pledge to give voice to the socioeconomically and politically disenfranchised. While Ennahda leaders have sought rapprochement with the economic elite to protect themselves, they have also realized that the party can benefit from the economic and political clout that some business figures have; in the 2014 elections, at least [nine businessmen ran on Ennahda lists](#).

### How do you assess Ennahda's political standing as the party heads into an important election season this fall?

Despite many challenges, Ennahda remains the most united party in Tunisian politics. Many of its members are bound together by the experience of exile and prison. This means that Ennahda will always enjoy a core support base, unlike many of its political competitors that were created after the revolution and lack an organized social base. In the 2019 elections, however, the newly established Tahya Tounes party created by Prime Minister Chahed's supporters will constitute a key rival to Ennahda. Chahed has been a popular figure since he launched an [anti-corruption campaign](#) in 2017, something that his predecessors failed to do. Chahed also has managed to present himself as a pragmatic leader willing to work with a wide range of parties. This has gained him a lot of respect across the political spectrum. For these reasons, Ennahda risks losing some of its voters to Tahya Tounes, especially those who did not support the Islamists out of religious considerations but because Ennahda vowed to tackle economic corruption and socioeconomic disenfranchisement, a pledge that has, so far, remained unfulfilled.



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