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# **MARKET FOR JIHAD**

## **Radicalization in Tunisia**

**Georges Fahmi and Hamza Meddeb**

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## About the Authors

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## Summary

While Tunisia is the only Arab country undergoing a successful democratic transition as of 2015, it has also been home to a growing Salafi-jihadi movement since the fall of former president Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali in January 2011. Ben Ali's monopolization of the religious sphere and neglect of socioeconomic issues opened the door to radicalization, and these factors, combined with the disillusionment of the youth and the mishandling of Salafists after the revolution, have resulted in escalating violence in Tunisia and the export of jihadists to Syria, Iraq, and Libya.

### The Roots of Salafi Jihadism

- Ben Ali's tight control of the religious sphere meant that there were few religious actors to step in after the revolution. The fall of the regime created a vacuum that allowed radical groups to preach their ideas and recruit new members among the disenfranchised youth.
- Ennahdha, a major Islamist religious movement as well as a political party, has focused on constitution building and political struggles and has not struck a healthy balance between politics and religion.
- Ennahdha has acted pragmatically to consolidate its political standing. But its failure to break with the former political system has further opened up space for social and political contestation.
- The socioeconomic situation in Tunisia has worsened since the revolution, which has led to the disenchantment of the lower and middle classes and the youth in particular.

### Recommendations for the State and Ennahdha

**Address socioeconomic grievances.** Tunisian youth are drawn to Salafi jihadism because of feelings of disillusionment and stagnation, so improving social mobility and stemming frustration among the younger generation should be high priorities.

**Strengthen political inclusion of the Salafi movement.** Those who would like to work within formal politics and civil society should be allowed to operate freely as long as they respect laws.



**Balance state control over the religious sphere.** The state should allow all nonviolent religious actors a voice, while also encouraging official imams to compete with Salafi preachers to create a diverse marketplace of religious ideas.

**Separate religious and political activities.** Two distinct organizational structures within Ennahdha will allow the political party to operate without any interference from the religious movement and the religious movement to operate without being manipulated by the party for political gains.

**Form de-radicalization coalitions.** Religious and secular actors should coordinate to formulate and implement policies aimed at de-radicalizing, disengaging, and reintegrating members of radical groups into society.

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## Introduction

While Tunisia is the only Arab country to undergo a successful democratic transition as of 2015, it also has witnessed a growing Salafi-jihadi movement since the fall of former president Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali in January 2011. The Salafi-jihadi movement calls for the establishment of an Islamic state and refuses to acknowledge the legitimacy of modern state institutions. The threat it poses has escalated and could destabilize the country's fragile democratic transition. Two recent attacks have garnered world attention—one on a beach in Sousse in June 2015 and another on the Bardo National Museum in March 2015—but these attacks, which left 38 and 22 dead, respectively, represent a larger escalation that has been building since 2012, the year of the first terrorist attack against the National Guard forces at the Tunisian-Algerian border.

According to Bilel Chaouachi, a prominent Salafi jihadist affiliated with Ansar al-Sharia, a Salafi-jihadi group established in April 2011, there are more than 50,000 Salafi jihadists in Tunisia.<sup>1</sup> In July 2015, the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights declared that there are also more than 5,500 Tunisians fighting in jihadi groups in Syria, Iraq, Libya, Yemen, and Mali.<sup>2</sup> Tunisian jihadists have been taking leading roles in the jihadi movements in Syria and Iraq. After the Sousse attack, the Tunisian prime minister announced that 15,000 more Tunisians were prevented from traveling to join jihadist groups.

Why is Salafi jihadism spreading alongside a process of democratic transition that was expected to have rendered such radical ideas less popular? As part of this transition, Islamist parties have been able to operate freely and to govern. This is the case with the Islamist party Ennahdha, which won Tunisia's first post-uprising election (held in October 2011) and is the second-strongest bloc in the current parliament, and the Salafi Reform Front Party, which took part in the parliamentary elections held in October 2014. However, Salafi jihadism has been able to spread more easily in Tunisia after the fall of the Ben Ali regime because of the weak religious sphere and lack of attention to socioeconomic issues.

The reason behind this development lies in the rules that governed the political and religious spheres under Ben Ali for the twenty-three years he was in office and that have impacted the period after the revolution. During these post-revolutionary years, the priority given to political and constitutional concerns led to the neglect of socioeconomic fractures inherited from the Ben Ali

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**Salafi jihadism has been able to spread more easily in Tunisia after the fall of the Ben Ali regime because of the weak religious sphere and lack of attention to socioeconomic issues.**

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era and left the expectations of the lower and middle classes largely unmet.<sup>3</sup> This fueled disenchantment among young people and encouraged radicalization. Ben Ali's marginalization of religious education and imposition of tight security controls over mosques also created a vacuum in the religious sphere that allowed radical religious actors to emerge after the fall of the regime to recruit new members among the disenfranchised youth. Tunisia is now witnessing the long-term implications of these deficiencies.

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**President Ben Ali sought to use religion to consolidate his legitimacy. He insisted on the importance of Islamic identity and values.**

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In order to overcome the growth of radicalization and radical groups, Tunisia needs to address the political demands of its youth and diversify the religious sphere. Addressing socioeconomic grievances in order to allow social mobility and stem frustration among

the younger generation will be critical. Institutionalizing the Salafi movement by allowing those who would like to work within formal politics and civil society to operate freely, as long as they respect the law, will also be necessary. The state should also loosen its control over the religious sphere and strengthen the competitiveness of state religious actors to allow for a diversity of religious ideas to emerge. Finally, Ennahdha, in its role as the strongest religious movement in Tunisia, needs to find the right balance between its religious and political activities because its presence in the marketplace of religious ideas will help minimize the influence of radical groups.

## Roots of Salafi Jihadism

An understanding of the development of Salafi jihadism in Tunisia first requires insight into how and why the government has relegated religion to the margins since independence. Tunisia's first post-colonial president, Habib Bourguiba (in office from 1957 to 1987), attempted to put religion under the full control of the state. He targeted Ez-Zitouna University, the oldest Arab and Islamic Sunni center for religious learning, founded in 737 CE, closing its primary and secondary educational systems and moving its higher education faculty to a faculty of theology at the University of Tunis. Unlike in Egypt where, under the rule of Gamal Abdel Nasser in the 1950s and 1960s and Anwar Sadat in the 1970s, the regime expanded religious institutions in order to use them as venues to justify its policies, Bourguiba prevented Ez-Zitouna from playing any public role, even in the service of the authoritarian regime. He also nationalized religious endowments and abolished the religious courts.

After his soft coup in 1987, President Ben Ali sought to use religion to consolidate his legitimacy. He insisted on the importance of Islamic identity and values. The national radio station broadcast the daily call to prayer, and Ez-Zitouna was reinstated as a university. Ben Ali granted amnesty to the leader of the Ennahdha Islamic movement, Rached al-Ghannouchi, and promised to

permit the movement to operate freely. Ennahdha (initially called the Islamic Tendency Movement) was founded in 1981 by a group of Islamist intellectuals inspired by the ideas of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. They preached an Islamic identity for the state and an Islamic Tunisian society.

Progress was halted after Ben Ali held slightly competitive elections in 1989, when the relatively strong electoral showing of the Islamic movement led him to clamp down on religious actors. Thousands were imprisoned, many others forced into exile, and Ennahdha's leadership was transferred to Europe. Subsequently, Ben Ali strengthened state security's control over mosques and imposed legal restrictions on the hijab and Islamic dress. Political, or even any public, expression of religiosity was considered a threat. As one Ennahdha leader described it: "it was not only a war against the Islamists but against any public form of religiosity."<sup>4</sup>

With Ennahdha going underground in the 1990s following Ben Ali's crack-down, Salafism started to rise. Salafism refers to a literal version of Islam that claims to follow the path of the Islamic ancestors (*salaf al-salib*). It is often classified into two categories: scripturalist (*al-salafiyya al-'ilmiiyya*) and jihadi (*al-salafiyya al-jihadiyya*). The former is generally apolitical and refuses to go against political rulers as long as they do not prevent the practice of Islam, while the latter believes in armed struggle to establish an Islamic state. Scripturalist Salafism grew in the 1990s through private meetings, books and audiovisual materials, and the religious satellite television channels that attracted many Tunisians striving for religious knowledge. These apolitical activities were relatively tolerated by the regime; Ben Ali thought Salafism could offer an apolitical alternative to Ennahdha's political project. However, alongside this apolitical version of Salafism, Salafi jihadism also emerged, prompted in part by the U.S. invasions of Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003, which led many Tunisians to join the fight against what they perceived to be a war on Islam.

The growth of the Salafi-jihadi movement can be linked to many factors in addition to the marginalization of other religious actors and the rise in worldwide jihadism. The Salafi jihadists took advantage of the security vacuum the country witnessed after the fall of Ben Ali's regime. Their preaching and charitable activities allowed them to expand their influence in the public sphere and to recruit militants in the suburbs of Tunis and the inland regions, especially Sidi Bouzid, Jendouba, Kairouan, and Kasserine. They offered aid to those in need, such as refugees fleeing the conflict in neighboring Libya in 2011 and citizens of the city of Jendouba affected by heavy flooding in 2012. Salafi groups also took advantage of the loosening of security in poor areas by engaging in vigilantism, social mediation, and conflict resolution. And they succeeded in establishing relationships with smuggling networks in the deprived border regions.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, they reached out to the media to defend their ideas.

The passive attitude of the post-revolution troika government, a coalition led by Ennahdha, toward Salafi jihadism created a permissive climate for this

movement. Though secularists criticized an apparent connivance between Salafi jihadists and Ennahdha, the attitude of the latter after the October 2011 elections was mostly guided by what Nadia Marzouki described as a risk-avoidance strategy inherent to its objective of becoming a normal political party after being excluded for decades.<sup>6</sup> This entailed avoiding creating enemies among either its secularist foes or its Salafi competitors.

### **Salafi Jihadism and Violence: Values vs Behavior**

To understand Salafi jihadism, it is important to understand its relationship with violence. Radicalism is an ideology that challenges the legitimacy of established norms and policies. It is not connected to a certain religion or political ideology per se, and it does not in itself lead to violence. Hence, when discussing radicalization, there is a need to distinguish between the level of values and the level of behavior. Holding radical views does not necessarily lead to violent behavior. Thus, while Salafi jihadism is a radical ideology that refuses to accept the legitimacy of political institutions, calls for the rule of Islam, and accepts the use of armed struggle to achieve its aims, not all Salafi jihadists are actually violent.

But many Salafi jihadists do believe that violence is the only way to challenge the state. This belief was transformed into action during the days of Ben Ali, both outside and inside Tunisia. Following the September 11, 2001, attacks and the subsequent war on terror, Tunisian youth joined Salafi-jihadi groups abroad—in Iraq, but also in Afghanistan, Yemen, and Somalia. In 2002, Salafi jihadists attacked a synagogue on the Tunisian island of Djerba. This drew the regime into a full war against Salafi jihadism; it enacted an antiterrorism law in 2003 and subsequently arrested around 2,000 people. At least 300 of those who were imprisoned under the antiterrorism law prior to the 2011 revolution had been fighting outside Tunisia.<sup>7</sup>

After the January 2011 revolution, and with it the end of the Ben Ali regime that was antagonistic to Salafi jihadism, most Salafi jihadists came to reject the use of violence in Tunisia, calling Tunisia a land for preaching, not combat. While they continue to refuse to recognize state institutions, a large number of Salafi jihadists do not think it necessary to confront the state itself, at least not at this stage.

Though its growth as a movement is undisputed, Salafi jihadism in Tunisia can be difficult to analyze because it is not composed of a single entity, but of different groups without a clear hierarchical structure. While they share the same ideas and often mobilize for the same causes, they are not structured within a defined organizational frame. Some of them even argue that any organizational form is opposed to Islamic values. It is therefore important to keep in mind that groups associated with Salafi jihadism, such as Ansar al-Sharia, are each unique entities not necessarily representative of the whole.

## The Salafi-Jihadi Group Ansar al-Sharia

Ansar al-Sharia was established in April 2011 as a group within the Salafi-jihadi ideology, but with a specific focus on the strict implementation of the Islamic sharia law. Though it is often considered to be the most organized group within Tunisian Salafi jihadism, it still has a loose structure, with founder Seifallah Ben Hassine, known as Abu Ayadh, at the top.

Ansar al-Sharia is an aggregate of three generations of Tunisian jihadists with different backgrounds and experiences. The generation of jihadists who had joined al-Qaeda in Afghanistan or in Europe in the 1990s and who had been extradited and jailed in Tunisia and the generation of young Tunisians who had been suspected of joining the Iraqi jihad after the U.S. invasion in 2003 often found themselves imprisoned together during the 2000s, and they took advantage of their incarceration to organize the Salafi-jihadi movement into what would come to be called Ansar al-Sharia. A younger generation joined the movement after the 2011 uprising, and Ansar al-Sharia became fully entrenched—though more as a brand for articulating social action and jihadi ideology than as a well-structured organization.

While some of the Salafi jihadists who formed Ansar al-Sharia previously believed in the need for armed struggle to establish an Islamic state, the Arab Spring led them to change their tactics and to focus instead on preaching religious ideology to prepare the ground for an Islamic state. Ansar al-Sharia founder Abu Ayadh, who in 2000 had co-founded the Tunisian Combatant Group (which was classified as a terrorist organization by the United Nations Security Council in 2002), is a prime example of this evolution. He was arrested in 2003 in Turkey and extradited to Tunisia, where he was imprisoned until January 2011. After the fall of Ben Ali, he changed his approach and formed Ansar al-Sharia. He has insisted on different occasions that violence is a trap and that the focus should be on preparing society for the rule of Islam through religious and social activities, not fighting.<sup>8</sup> Toward this end, members of Ansar al-Sharia have taken control of a number of mosques, distributed religious publications, and organized preaching meetings to propagate their ideas.

Observers have noted that Ansar al-Sharia initially acted as a youth social movement targeting the disenfranchised masses.<sup>9</sup> It was linked ideologically but not politically or operationally with the international Salafi-jihadi movement, and at first was far from adopting the apocalyptic vision promoted by al-Qaeda.<sup>10</sup>

But some members of Ansar al-Sharia have indeed engaged in violent protests as a way to counter the state. Examples include the attacks against the Afric'Art Cinema for showing the controversial film *La Rabbi, La Sidi* (No God, No Master) on June 26, 2011; against the offices of the private television

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channel Nessma for broadcasting the French-Iranian film *Persepolis* on October 9, 2011; and against the U.S. embassy to protest an American movie denigrating the Prophet Muhammad on September 14, 2012.

Others in Ansar al-Sharia have gone even further, taking up arms either outside Tunisia by joining the jihadi groups in Syria and Iraq or inside Tunisia by targeting security forces and secular political figures. This resulted in a series of attacks against the Tunisian police and the assassination of two political figures from the opposition, Chokri Belaid and Mohamed Brahmi, in February and July 2013, respectively. The assassinations put the post-revolutionary political transition process at risk because secular political forces accused Ansar al-Sharia of being behind the assassinations and the ruling Islamist party Ennahdha of protecting it. The Ali Larayedh government classified Ansar al-Sharia as a terrorist group in August 2013, and Ennahdha stepped down from power in January 2014.

## Political Exclusion and Socioeconomic Marginalization of Youth

Salafi jihadism, which started as a radical movement at the margins of society, was able to expand in Tunisia after 2011 because of rapid political and economic changes. It appealed primarily to young people feeling alienated by the post-Ben Ali political regime and provided an outlet for their sometimes-violent reactions to the state's failure to include them socially and economically. The worsening of the lower and middle classes' economic and social situation after the revolution, and the government's failure to address their social and economic claims, fueled their radicalization. Though Ennahdha was politically legitimized in the elections following the 2011 revolution, the Islamist party subsequently failed to tame the Salafi-jihadi phenomenon by adequately addressing the marginalization of the youth.

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There is a common misinterpretation that the spread of jihadism among young people reflects a class struggle—with Ennahdha representing the conservative middle class and the Salafi-jihadi movement rallying the lower classes. Even though many young people attracted to the Salafi movement lived off of odd jobs and some of them were even delinquents, many are university graduates with a middle-class background who nevertheless failed to find jobs and opportunities

that met their expectations.

The profiles of the youth involved in recent attacks attest to the spread of the jihadi movement among middle-class students and young professionals. One of the perpetrators of the Bardo museum attack was a middle-class secondary

school student—his father is a well-established farmer, and his uncles are school teachers—from the Kasserine governorate. Located on the Algerian border, it was one of the strongholds of the revolution against Ben Ali's regime, but four years later it is still suffering from marginalization and lack of development. The second young man implicated in the Bardo attack hailed from a working-class neighborhood in Tunis. He had dropped out of university and was working as a courier in a travel agency. Seifeddine Rezgui, the perpetrator of the Sousse attack on June 26, 2015, was a master's student from the depressed region of Siliana. His family was part of the lower class, though his parents had struggled to ensure a decent standard of living for their children. Rezgui most likely became radicalized via the Internet.<sup>11</sup>

These trajectories reflect the fact that radicalization crosses all social classes. They also reflect the evolving role of an autoradicalization process that is taking place outside the religious sphere and capitalizing on the changes occurring in the lives of young people and the failure of the new regime to include and protect them. Tunisian youth have experienced a deep crisis that has two primary characteristics: a socioeconomic crisis characterized by a general uncertainty regarding the future compounded by a profound search for a meaning in a polarized society.

The jihadi movement's threat undoubtedly lies in its capacity to attract young people, like the three described above, who are unhappy with their social status. A survey conducted in the regions of Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine on the social and demographic factors that triggered the uprising showed that 62 percent of young graduates believed their socioeconomic situation to be worse than that of their parents.<sup>12</sup> The structure of unemployment has evolved in the last ten years to hit people with higher education particularly hard, with the number of university graduates among job seekers increasing from 11 percent in 2000 to 33.2 percent by the end of 2013. Among the currently employed, 85 percent of workers have not graduated from high school. In other words, Tunisian youth, especially university graduates, are getting stuck in a society unable to offer social and professional opportunities.

The dissatisfaction of graduates is related to the lag between the educational system's output and the opportunities offered by the labor market—each year about 140,000 people enter the labor market to compete for only 60,000 to 65,000 new jobs—which condemns the brightest young Tunisians to a paradoxical unemployment: those with university qualifications are actually at higher risk of remaining jobless or working in a job that does not correspond to their qualifications.<sup>13</sup> This means that the education system no longer allows young people to climb up the social ladder, causing the middle class to shrink and feeding social tensions.

The youth affected by this phenomenon were particularly disappointed when the 2011 revolutionary changes came to a sudden end. The policies implemented by the post-Ben Ali governments—such as the *hadhira*



(welfare-to-work projects), a mass-employment program, and the *Amal* (hope) allowance, which was a temporary benefit for university graduates that was wound down in May 2015—were mainly emergency measures that attempted to stem social anger. Unemployment has actually risen since the fall of the Ben Ali regime, as the slowdown of investments, increased political uncertainties, renewal of corruption, and continued European recession (Europe being Tunisia’s main economic partner) have all coalesced into a worsening of the socioeconomic situation. A recent World Bank report on youth inclusion in Tunisia showed that 33 percent of young people (between fifteen and twenty-nine years old) are unoccupied, that is to say they are not in education, in employment, or in training (known as NEET).<sup>14</sup>

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The optimism occasioned by the revolution has therefore soured—90 percent of the youth living in the suburbs of Tunis estimate that their situation has not changed, and 46 percent consider it even worse than it was under Ben Ali’s regime.<sup>15</sup> In this context of general disappointment, police exaction is feeding resentment and bitterness among alienated urban youth. Indeed, the absence of serious reform in the

Ministry of Interior opened the door to the return of many repressive practices from Ben Ali’s regime, including torture in police stations and prisons. As pointed out by Aaron Zelin, a scholar at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, “abuses could be a source of radicalization or re-radicalization for those who had previously quit jihadi movements in the past few years.”<sup>16</sup> In these conditions, the implementation of the state of emergency after the Sousse attack and the July 2015 counterterrorism law’s restrictive measures on liberties are likely to create a climate of impunity among security services and to fuel extremism.<sup>17</sup> The overall feeling of injustice among disappointed young people will likely continue to be manifested in popular dissatisfaction with party politics and the belief that the revolution has been hijacked by the political elite.

The existence of dissatisfied youth does not systematically lead to radicalization; however, the perception that they do not deserve their low status fuels societal fractures and invites violence.<sup>18</sup> Well-educated and seemingly destined to achieve social promotion, many young Tunisians have found themselves instead marginalized by unemployment or insecurity, beginning with the structural adjustment program in the mid-1980s and continuing with the implementation of privatization and liberalization reforms in the 1990s and the failed promise of the 2011 revolution. As a famous Salafi song says, they are “strangers” (*ghourabaa*) who have lost a sense of belonging to society.<sup>19</sup> For these would-be middle-class members who have failed to carve out a place for themselves in a society plagued by corruption and clientelism,<sup>20</sup> Salafi jihadism has come to offer a protest identity.

## Weak Religious Sphere

The religious sphere in Tunisia after the fall of Ben Ali has been shaped by two main factors. The first is the weakness of state religious institutions, either because they had been weakened by the policies of the old regime, as is the case with Ez-Zitouna, or because they were delegitimized in the post-Ben Ali era because of their support for the old regime, as is the case with the official imams affiliated with the Ministry of Religious Affairs. The second factor is Ennahdha's focus on political activities at the expense of religious activities. These two factors together have created a religious vacuum that has made it easier for religiously radical ideas to spread.

If the Ben Ali era was characterized by tight control over the religious sphere, the years following the fall of the regime in 2011 have been notable for the security apparatus's loss of this control. The preachers who praised Ben Ali were prevented from entering mosques, and the Ministry of Religious Affairs lost control of around one-fifth of Tunisia's 5,000 mosques.<sup>21</sup> Unlike the case of Egypt under the rule of Mubarak, where the religious market was filled with relatively strong state religious institutions, such as al-Azhar, and the strong presence of the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi groups, the market in Tunisia was almost empty when the regime fell. Radical religious groups took advantage of this religious vacuum to spread their ideas and recruit new members.

The different governments of the transitional period have been largely successful in regaining control over the religious sphere. In May 2013, the former minister of religious affairs, Nourredine Khadmi, declared that only 100 mosques were still outside the ministry's control. However, this number did not include the approximately 189 mosques that were built without official permission. The Ministry of Religious Affairs recently issued a declaration stating that these mosques must adjust their legal status or the ministry would take necessary measures against them. The new minister of religious affairs, Othman Batikh, is determined to enforce the law by putting all mosques and imams under the ministry's control.

This represents a growing movement toward bringing the religious sphere back under the strict control of the state, as it was under Ben Ali. After the attack in Sousse, Prime Minister Habib Essid declared that the government would close down 80 mosques that were not under the control of the state. The ministry also relieved the famous Salafi preacher Bechir Ben Hassan of his duties and appointed another imam to take his position. These measures even went beyond the Salafi sheikhs to include religious figures close to Ennahdha, such as Khadmi, who was prevented from preaching. Some religious figures, including Ennahdha's famous preacher Habib Ellouz, have expressed their fear that these measures will not stop violent radicalization, but might rather reinforce it. The government needs to find its way between the two extremes of

chaos and strict control of the religious sphere. The ministry should manage, but not control, the religious sphere.

Ennahdha has successfully built a political party by acting pragmatically during the transitional period. Following the 2011 Constituent Assembly election, Ennahdha agreed to share power with two secular political parties, forming the troika alliance. Ennahdha also favored dialogue with its political opponents as a way to resolve the several political crises facing its rule. Following its defeat in the parliamentary elections in 2014, Ennahdha declared its acceptance of the results, thereby challenging the idea that Islamist parties accept democracy only until they reach power.

However, this political success came with a price that has often gone unnoticed: it damaged Ennahdha's position within the religious sphere. First, the political compromises Ennahdha had to make during the constitution-writing process in matters of sharia law damaged its image with religiously conservative youth. One Salafi youth asked, "So what's Islamic about Ennahdha, if they cannot even add an article about sharia to the constitution?" Another older man, who had spent over ten years in prison under the old regime, asked, "Why did we go to prison if at the end Ennahdha, when in power, could not stand for its religious principles?" Second, Ennahdha focused on political struggles and paid little attention to its religious activities. Although Ennahdha figures like Sadek Chourou and Habib Ellouz are involved in personal religious activities, the movement itself does not currently have a religious project.

While many people perceive Ennahdha as a political party and hence assess its experience during the transitional period as a success, others perceive it as a religious movement and so think it failed to uphold the principles of Islam. As Ennahdha is both a political party and a religious movement, both evaluations should be taken into consideration. One indictment seems fair: Ennahdha failed to maintain a healthy balance between its political and religious activities.

Meanwhile, comparing Ennahdha to the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Turkey and celebrating the fact that Ennahdha is moving closer to the Turkish model overlooks an important difference between the two cases: the religious market in Turkey is filled with strong religious movements, like the Naqshbandi, Süleymanlılar, and Nur, and therefore the AKP never had to choose between the religious and the political because the two were already separated. This is not the case for Ennahdha in Tunisia, where the religious market is almost empty; Ennahdha's decision to focus on the political side has deprived the religious market of a strong religious player that could have balanced the presence of radical religious movements. The leadership of Ennahdha has come to realize this problem; Ghannouchi recently stressed the need to address religious activities and to find a balance between the focus on society and on government.<sup>22</sup>

## Ennahdha's Mishandling of Salafists

While the Salafi jihadists focused on preaching and charity work and tried to attract the younger generation and gain control over mosques in the suburbs and other economically marginalized areas, Ennahdha neglected its religious element and consolidated its position as a political force. But following its victory in the October 2011 election for the Tunisian Constituent Assembly, Ennahdha had to face the Salafi-jihadi challenge, embodied primarily by Ansar al-Sharia.

Ennahdha vacillated between two competing approaches to dealing with Salafi jihadism. The first approach argued that if Salafi jihadists were allowed to operate publicly, they would moderate their ideas through interaction with other Islamic groups and thus could be an asset to the Islamic movement. The second perceived them as a threat not only to the Tunisian political process but also to Ennahdha's first ruling experience. In the initial phase after the revolution, the first approach was dominant, and Ennahdha allowed Salafi jihadists to operate in the religious sphere.

However, wishing to fulfill its responsibility as a governing party, Ennahdha eventually ended up confronting Salafi-jihadi groups, for instance in the 2012 "war of mosques," in which the minister of religious affairs strove to regain control over the mosques that were under the sway of Salafi groups. Abu Ayyub, one of the leaders of Ansar al-Sharia, protested: "We are staying in the mosques. We are not interested in seating in the national Constituent Assembly. We want the mosques and we won't accept any bargaining on this matter."<sup>23</sup> Divergences with the Salafi jihadists increased when Ennahdha refrained from referring to sharia law in the April 2012 constitution draft, supported the freedom of conscience and the prohibition of *takfir* (the accusation of apostasy), and accepted gender equality in the 2013 final version of the constitution.

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As Ennahdha succeeded in consolidating its position in the political sphere through bargaining and concessions to its secularist allies or opponents, the position of factions within Ansar al-Sharia that favored violence became stronger. By December 2011, Abu Ayadh had already threatened Ennahdha that there would be consequences if they were to make concessions to accommodate the secularists' positions,<sup>24</sup> and the rise of political violence in 2013 gave the group within Ennahdha that wanted to confront Ansar al-Sharia the legitimacy to act more strongly. In May 2013, the Ennahdha government refused to allow Ansar al-Sharia to hold its third annual meeting. In August 2013, then prime minister Ali Larayedh, now Ennahdha's secretary general, declared Ansar al-Sharia a terrorist organization because of its involvement in the killings of Chokri Belaid, Mohamed Brahmi, and other security officers. The arrest of more than 6,500 young people who were members of or sympathized

with Ansar al-Sharia weakened its leadership, which, in turn, resulted in a loss of control over its ranks and some members' engagement in violence.<sup>25</sup>

The fact that Ennahdha voted against excluding the former regime's leading figures from participating in the 2014 elections proved the pragmatism of a movement in search of political recognition and therefore ready to accept continuity with the past. This failure to break with the former political system further opened up space for Salafi jihadism's social and political contestation. But the growth of Salafi jihadism was also fueled by a transformation in the patterns of global jihad. Since the creation of the self-proclaimed Islamic State, ruptures in social and political order have been met with the promise of a utopia based on a new social and political order centered on Islam. Like al-Qaeda in the 2000s, the Islamic State has succeeded in inventing what Olivier Roy described as "a narrative that could allow rebels without a cause to connect with a cause."<sup>26</sup> In other words, Salafi jihadism provides disappointed youth with a grammar of rebellion, transforming the Islamic State into an alternative to the "illegitimate" national state. This narrative merges political and religious matters in order to mobilize volunteers for jihad in Syria, Iraq, Libya, and, increasingly, Tunisia.

## Recommendations for Reversing the Growth of Jihadi Salafism

The escalation in jihadi violence says a great deal not only about security challenges but also about political and religious challenges faced by actors in Tunisia's democratic transition. A number of measures are required to face this current wave of radicalization in Tunisia and to allow for relations between religion and the state that would protect religious freedoms without endangering the democratic process. These measures include the political inclusion of nonviolent Salafists, the establishment of a more diverse marketplace of religious ideas, and an effort by Ennahdha, as the most important religious movement in Tunisia, to find a healthy balance between politics and religion. In addition to these measures, there is need for a comprehensive strategy of de-radicalization that involves other actors in what might be called a de-radicalization coalition.<sup>27</sup>

### Political Inclusion of Salafists

Recruits to Salafi jihadism are often driven less by ideology than by discontent with the institutional political actors, whether secular or Islamist. The confrontation between the jihadi movement and the security forces is a zero-sum game that can cause permanent instability, threatening the democratic process. The success of Tunisian democracy therefore requires the political inclusion of at least part of the Salafi movement. Inclusion would encourage the Tunisian

Salafi movement to proceed to ideological revisions. Cheikh Mounir Abu Moudhaffar Attounsi, one of the founding fathers of the Salafi movement in Tunisia, provides a case in point. The ideological revisions he is attempting and his rapprochement with the Reform Front Party can be seen as steps toward the institutionalization of this movement. Attounsi refuses to equate democracy with *koufr*, stating that democracy is better than an imposed autocratic rule. He also supports the freedom of conscience as long as it comes with the freedom to preach Islamic values.<sup>28</sup>

In addition to the inclusion of Salafists, there is also a need to avoid excluding religious groups from working in both the political sphere and civil society as long as they do not use or call for the use of violence. A dividing line should be drawn between those advocating violence and those committed to peaceful advocacy of their ideas; this is the case of Hizb ut-Tahrir, which is not a Salafi group but an Islamic party that calls for the restoration of the Islamic caliphate. After the Sousse attack, increased pressure has been put on the government to ban Hizb ut-Tahrir, mainly by secular forces arguing that this party does not recognize the new constitution and the republican system.

Despite its radical political position advocating the establishment of the caliphate, Hizb ut-Tahrir should be allowed to operate freely. The banishment of this party would fuel anger among its supporters and more broadly among the conservative and religious population, who would feel excluded from the public sphere and could be easily recruited by violent groups. This would create a sense of injustice and alienation and feed radicalization.

### **Allowing a Diverse Marketplace of Religious Ideas**

Before the revolution, Tunisia had no strong religious actors. The Ministry of Religious Affairs had a monopoly over the religious sphere, but its imams' support for the old regime delegitimized them after the fall of the regime. The ministry is now trying to use the electoral legitimacy of the government in power, either under the rule of the troika or the current government led by Nidaa Tounes, in order to regain its control over the religious sphere. However, this strategy might add fuel to the radicalization process.

Instead of allowing state religious institutions to have a monopoly over the religious sphere or allowing unofficial preachers to take advantage of a weak system, the regime needs to foster a competitive marketplace of ideas, where any religious actor that does not practice or call for political violence or adopt a hateful discourse is allowed to operate. The Ministry of Religious Affairs also needs to offer official imams training that includes both religious and modern subjects so they can compete with Salafi preachers. The regime must balance too-tight control with lack of control: if it grants state religious institutions a monopoly over the marketplace, it damages its legitimacy and paradoxically

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**A dividing line should be drawn between those advocating violence and those committed to peaceful advocacy of their ideas.**

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allows for the emergence of a parallel marketplace of religious ideas where the state has no control and state religious institutions are not even players.

### **Efforts by Ennahdha to Balance Political and Religious Activities**

Before 2011, Ennahdha's members had been forced out of the country or underground. Hence, unlike the case with the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Ennahdha had no existing social or religious activities when it came to power. After the fall of Ben Ali, Ennahdha focused on the political struggles of the transitional period and paid little attention to the religious sphere, allowing Salafi jihadism to spread its ideas and recruit new members, mainly among the youth. Now Ennahdha needs to find a better balance between politics and religion, differentiating its identities as a political party and a religious movement.

The party should be allowed to operate within the political sphere without any interference from the religious movement based on religious arguments, and the religious movement should be able to operate within the religious sphere without being manipulated by the party for political gains. In order to ensure this differentiation, the party and the movement should have two separate organizational structures. Each structure should be able to set its own agenda and form its own coalition to achieve its aims. While the two structures might share the same ideological reference, they should operate in two different spheres: the political and the religious.

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**The Moroccan model might offer important insights into how to approach the bifurcation of the Tunisian Islamic movement.**

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The Moroccan model might offer important insights into how to approach the bifurcation of the Tunisian Islamic movement. The Moroccan Unification and Reform Movement is an Islamic religious organization affiliated with but independent from the Justice and Development Party. While a similar split within

Ennahdha would entail a complicated and long process, Ghannouchi could draw on his charismatic power to help Ennahdha make this move and enforce this balance until the rules are consolidated and respected by both the movement and the party.

### **Building De-Radicalization Coalitions**

Religious actors play an essential role in de-radicalization, but they need to coordinate their efforts with other actors in what might be called a "de-radicalization coalition." The formulation of policies designed to de-radicalize, disengage, and reintegrate members of radical groups into society has become an indispensable counterpart to classical counterterrorism strategies. In Denmark for example, the Danish Security and Intelligence Service initiated a program that brings together schools, social authorities, and local police to prevent the radicalization of Danish youth. State officials, religious authorities, civic

organizations, academics, and media representatives need to work together to formulate and implement these policies in Tunisia.

## Conclusion

While Ennahdha and secular parties reached a limited political arrangement to allow them to take Tunisia's democratic transition forward, what is needed now is a broader debate about religion and politics as well as a transitional justice process that will broaden inclusion within society and stem the tide of radicalization. Depending only on classical counterterrorism strategies will not only fail to prevent violent radicalization, it might actually increase it. The Tunisian government and other political and religious actors need to work together on a de-radicalization strategy that brings reform to both the political and the religious spheres.





## Notes

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