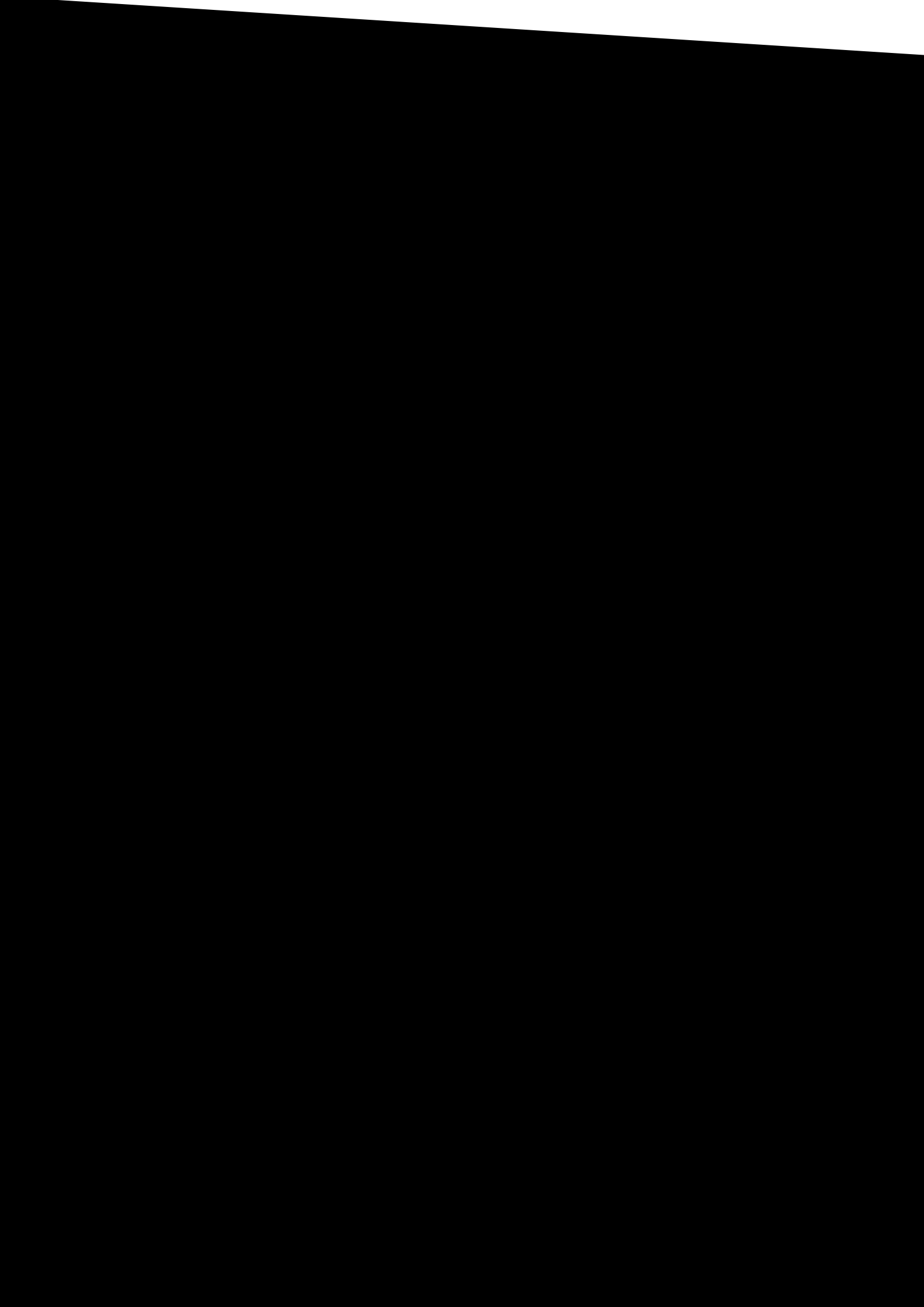


MODERATES OR MANIPULATORS?

TUNISIA'S ENNAHDA ISLAMISTS

BY OREN KESSLER





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This paper is written in the author's personal capacity and the views expressed are his alone.

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Executive summary

The Ennahda party, which heads a coalition in Tunisia's first freely elected government, is described by most international observers as being a "moderate Islamist" party despite its ideologically extreme origins, the recorded statements of founder Rachid Ghannouchi and the party's worrying recent activities.

Appeasing ultra-extreme Salafists

Since assuming the mantle of government, Ennahda is engaged in an awkward double balancing act of appeasing both Tunisians and the West and secularists and ultra-extreme Salafists.

- Ennahda has tolerated but distanced itself from often-violent Salafist rallies in Tunisia, but it has also ruled out basing the country's new constitution on sharia law.
- Ennahda officials have also given implicit support to extremists by denouncing the award-winning animated film *Persopolis* as "prostitution" after the home of film's Tunisian exhibitor was firebombed by Salafists.

Support for Hamas

- Tunisian Prime Minister Hamadi Jebali, an Ennahda member, hosted a high-ranking Hamas official in November 2011 at which the official declared "The conquest of Jerusalem will set out from here. You are witnessing a divine, historic moment -- a new era in civilization, God willing: the sixth caliphate."

Support for extremist group Hizb ut-Tahrir

- Ennahda has given a license to Hizb ut-Tahrir, an Islamist party that is banned in several Muslim-majority countries and in some European countries. Hizb ut-Tahrir's express aim is to establish an Islamic caliphate.

Restricting religious freedom

- In June 2012, a 30 year-old man was sentenced to seven years in prison for posting caricatures of Mohammed on Facebook.
- In August 2012, Ennahda introduced a blasphemy proscription in a draft bill to the Constituent Assembly; if accepted, this bill would make "...insults, profanity, derision and representation of Allah and Mohammed" punishable by two years in prison, and four years for repeat offences.

Restricting women's rights

- In August 2012, Ennahda incurred the anger of many Tunisian feminists by introducing language into the draft constitution which suggests that women are "complementary" to men.

RACHID GHANNOUCHI

Since Ennahda's ascent to power, Ghannouchi has been celebrated for his stewardship of a transitional government. In July 2012, he shared the prestigious Chatham House Prize in part for promoting "a culture of tolerance and bridge-building across the political spectrum."

Scrutiny of Ghannouchi's documented views have been largely absent from the media and policy discussions about Tunisia. During his 23 years in exile in London, however, he demonstrated ideological support for jihad and jihadist movements, anti-Israeli and anti-Semitic views, denial of religious freedom and support for Islamist subversion of democracy

Support for jihad

- During the First Gulf War, Ghannouchi called for "unceasing war against the Americans until they leave the land of Islam or we will burn and destroy all their interests across the entire Islamic world."
- Ghannouchi excoriated the Saudi regime for its "colossal crime" in allowing "Crusader America" on Islamic soil.

Support for jihadist movements

- In 1990, Ghannouchi assured the leaders of Hezbollah and Islamic Jihad that "the greatest danger to civilization, religion and world peace is the United States Administration. It is the Great Satan."

Support for Saddam Hussein

- In 1990 Ghannouchi lauded Saddam Hussein as a unifier of Muslim lands

Denial of religious freedoms

- Ghannouchi has in recent years issued fatwas against secular Tunisian writers such as Lafif Lakhdar -- for writing a supposedly blasphemous book he did not write -- and Mongia Souahi, who wrote a book that given a theological refutation of the Islamic veil for women. Ghannouchi charged Souahi with takfir, the allegation of unbelief, which carries severe punishment -- in some cases the death penalty

Anti-Israeli and anti-Semitic statements

- In 1994, Ghannouchi described the State of Israel as an "alien polity [inserted] into the very heart of the Islamic world, which would exhaust its resources and obstruct any attempt at re-forging Muslim unity." The idea of Israel's doing so, he said, "proved immediately appealing to European policymakers and served well the new Western orientation which was materialistic, secular, and obsessed with the idea of territorial expansion."
- Ghannouchi described the Oslo Accords as "a Jewish-American plan encompassing the entire region, which would cleanse it of all resistance and open it to Jewish economy and cultural activity, culminating in complete Jewish hegemony from Marrakesh to Kazakhstan."

Support for Islamist subversion of democracy

- In 1998, Ghannouchi declared that Islamists could abide by secular democracy, but only to postpone "the long-term objective of establishing an Islamic government."

Introduction

In December 2010, Tunisians lit the spark that set the Arab world ablaze. Six weeks of protests overturned President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's 25-year autocracy, and subsequent parliamentary elections gave a plurality to Ennahda, a long-banned Islamist party seen as the Tunisian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. At the same time, hard-line Salafists emerged to challenge Ennahda for the title of standard bearers of political Islam.

Ennahda had waited out the Ben Ali era in the shadows – its followers silenced, its leaders exiled. For more than two decades the movement's co-founder and chief ideologue, Rachid Ghannouchi, had lived in London, where as a writer and activist he exhorted Muslims to return to a faith-centered life, while at the same time insisting Islam and democracy need not be mutually exclusive. Since his triumphant return to Tunisia last year, Ghannouchi has promised an Ennahda-led government would promote a tolerant society and opposed proposals to base its new constitution on Islamic sharia law. As a result, Western media now almost universally depict Ennahda as 'moderate Islamists', ignoring its history of domestic violence and the new Tunisia constitution's troubling language about women.

Moreover, since its electoral success, Ennahda's relations with Tunisia's Salafists have been decidedly fraught. Where Ennahda has not indulged the Salafists' uncompromising agenda, it has denounced that agenda as "un-Islamic." But Ennahda's own record suggests its objectives – ridding society of Western influence and returning it to Islam – and those of the Salafists are broadly congruent, even if the former group's methods demonstrate greater pragmatism, nuance and political sophistication. Western decision-makers must remain vigilant in keeping the onus on Ennahda to prove it has forsaken its extremist origins, and that its putative moderation is more than ideological repackaging aimed at winning over skeptics at home and abroad.

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An Arab anomaly

Tunisia remains – even now, with its Islamists emboldened – the Arab world's best hope for governance approximating liberal democracy. For one, Tunisia is the most secular Arab state – the product of the traditionally accommodating Islam practiced in much of North Africa, the republican legacy of 65 years of French colonial rule and the militantly anti-religious dictatorships of Habib Bourguiba and Ben Ali that followed. It is also arguably the most Westernised of the Arab states, with two-thirds of its population proficient in French (like Paris, Tunis is split into arrondissements), a language that remains a status marker in business, media, science, education and the arts. Tunisia's people, moreover, are almost all Sunni Muslim (at least nominally), with none of the sectarian hatreds bedeviling Lebanon, Syria or Iraq.

Tunisia is also small – 163,000 square miles, only slightly larger than England and Wales – with almost a quarter of its population of 10.7 million in and around the outward-looking capital Tunis. With a per-capita GDP of nearly \$10,000, Tunisia's economy is one of the most robust and diverse in the Middle East. Key sectors include agriculture, mining, fuel, manufacturing and tourism.¹ As recently as 2010, the World Economic Forum named Tunisia's economy the most competitive in Africa.²

Tunisia is also a regional leader on women's rights. It was the first Arab state to grant women the right to vote; it legalised abortion in the same year as the United States; and, under Ben Ali, had proportionally more female MPs

than France. Female literacy is 71 per cent – more than any other Arab nation – and women outnumber men among university graduates. Polygamy is banned and marriage conditional on a woman's consent. Prostitution is legal and regulated by the state.³

Many outside observers were therefore stunned when, as a consequence, Tunisians handed Ennahda the largest share of votes in the first free elections in the country's history, held in October 2011. The Islamist movement won approximately 40 per cent of the popular vote (giving it 89 seats in the 217-seat Constituent Assembly), far ahead of the second-place Congress for the Republic (CPR), a center-left secular party. Ennahda's victory, however, was attributable primarily to highly factional and disorganised nature of Tunisia's secular parties, which (unlike their far smaller counterparts in Egypt and most other Arab states) have considerable support in Tunisia – perhaps up to half of the electorate.

In December 2011, Ennahda struck a coalition deal with CPR and Ettakatol (another secularist party) to appoint a member from Ennahda, Hamadi Jebali, as prime minister and CPR's Moncef Marzouki as president. The new constitution, the first draft of which is expected to be produced by April 2013, will delineate the relative powers of premier and president. Unsurprisingly, Ennahda is pushing a parliamentary model with a strong prime minister,⁴ while the CPR seeks a French-style system in which the president wields more clout.⁵

Revolution and “Renaissance”

Ennahda has its roots in the Islamist groups that proliferated in universities throughout the Muslim world after the 1979 Revolution. Ennahda's leaders supported the siege of the US Embassy in Tehran by Iranian militants and, in the 1980s, Ennahda members were blamed for the terrorist attacks on four hotels in Tunisia.⁶

In 1989 the group, originally known as the “Movement of the Islamic Tendency, changed its name to Ennahda (“Renaissance”), and was promptly banned by the government. Party operatives struck back by attacking the headquarters of the president's party, killing one person and throwing acid in the faces of several others.

Ben Ali jailed tens of thousands of the group's members over the course of his reign, and sent most of its leadership into exile. Ghannouchi was expelled from Tunisia in 1989, and spent the next 23 years in London. Ghannouchi spent his time in exile writing essays on topics including social justice and women's rights, which he argued could be achieved within the Muslim tradition, and posited ways to achieve these modern priorities within that tradition. As a young man, Ghannouchi drew inspiration from Sayyid Qutb, the intellectual godfather of the Muslim Brotherhood, but later distanced himself from the Qutb's more obscure theories about the West's moral degeneracy and eternal enmity for Islam. In later life Ghannouchi affirmed the possibility of non-Muslim rule in Muslim-majority countries, and last year

told Al Jazeera that, unlike more hard-line Islamists, he opposes the forceful reinstatement of the Islamic caliphate.⁷

Even before Ben Ali's January 2011 ouster, Western media had designated Ennahda “moderate Islamists” and, a year and a half later, the party is rarely referred to as anything else. Leading news agencies such as the Associated Press and Reuters, as well as broadcast and print outlets involving the BBC and the New York Times regularly describe Ennahda as “moderate.”⁸

A characteristic assessment of Ennahda's supposed moderation was offered by Noah Feldman, a Harvard Law professor who helped draft the post-Saddam Iraqi constitution, who argued: “From the standpoint of the global ideal of democracy, this is a victory of historic proportions.”⁹

In an article entitled “How Islamists Can Save Tunisia's Revolution,” The Atlantic's Max Fisher wrote that a coalition between Ennahda, liberals and secularists would prove that Tunisia's Western and Islamic identities “...are not irreconcilable, that the country does not have to choose. If this day comes, Tunisia will have accomplished something truly revolutionary.”¹⁰ Only a handful of pundits have been consistently skeptical of Ennahda's claim to moderation.¹¹

In his “Participation in Non-Islamic Government”, released by Oxford University Press in its 1998 anthology, *Liberal Islam*, Ghannouchi wrote that Islam requires believers to “implement

the law of God, and not to resort to laws other than His.”¹²

“However, such a transition may incite hostility towards them from within their own countries or from other countries, render the newly-formed Islamic government susceptible to oppression and other forms of pressure that may end with its collapse.

“Is there any reason that why such groups cannot agree or coordinate with secular groups in order to isolate the existing oppressive power and establish a secular democracy, postponing the long-term objective of establishing an Islamic government until circumstances permit? Certainly, there is nothing against that.”¹³

Ghannouchi here clearly identifies a tactical alliance with secularists in the service of a long-term strategy for total Islamist rule, a fact that ought to be borne in mind when assessing his contemporary policy recommendations.

Ghannouchi's writing is also laden with the same anti-Western themes that typify mainstream Islamist discourse. During the first Gulf War, Ghannouchi proclaimed: “We must wage unceasing war against the Americans until they leave the land of Islam,” he proclaimed during the First Gulf War, “or we will burn and destroy all their interests across the entire Islamic world.”¹⁴ Ghannouchi lauded Saddam Hussein as a unifier of Muslim lands, and excoriated the Saudi regime for its “colossal crime”¹⁵ of allowing “Crusader America” on Islamic soil. At the 1990 “Islamic Conference on Palestine” in Tehran, he assured leaders of Hezbollah and Islamic Jihad that “the greatest danger to civilization, religion and world peace is the United States Administration. It is the Great Satan.”¹⁶

In 2005, Ghannouchi issued a fatwa via Nahda.net, Ennahda's website, against prominent Tunisian writer and secularist Lafif Lakhdar, then 71 years old. Lakhdar's

alleged offence was having authored a book Ghannouchi deemed irreverent toward Mohammed.¹⁷ In fact, Lakhdar authored no such book. Fearing that the fatwa would lead to a violence against him, a host of Muslim human rights activists started a defense campaign for Lakhdar. This was followed by an online petition to end all fatwas against secularists, in light of Ghannouchi's edict, which was circulated to then-British Prime Minister Tony Blair.¹⁸

In 2007, the now-deceased British journalist Christopher Hitchens visited Tunisia and met with Mongia Souahi, the author of a book which contends that the Koran does not command women to wear the Islamic veil.¹⁹ Souahi drew the inevitable censure of Islamists, including Ghannouchi who charged her with takfir – the allegation of unbelief. “This, as everybody knows, is the prelude to declaring her life to be forfeit as an apostate”, Hitchens recalled last year. “I was slightly alarmed to see Ghannouchi and his organisation, Hizb al-Nahda, described in Sunday's New York Times as ‘progressive,’ and to learn that he is on his way home from London.”²⁰

Since emerging as a political beneficiary of Ben Ali's ouster, Ghannouchi has presented himself to Western audiences as an opponent of Islamic fundamentalism. In an interview with Foreign Policy magazine's Marc Lynch last year, Ghannouchi said, “There are no people in al-Nahda who are takfiri; there is no one in al-Nahda that believes that violence is a means of change or to keep power; there is no one in al-Nahda that does not believe in equality between men and women; no one in al-Nahda believes that jihad is a way to impose Islam on the world.”²¹

Ghannouchi's own associations render these assertions suspect. He is tied to Saudi Arabia's puritanical Wahhabi

Salafists²² through his founding membership in the World Assembly of Muslim Youth,²³ and to the Muslim Brotherhood through his membership in the European Council for Fatwa and Research²⁴ and the International Union of Muslim Scholars.²⁵ The latter two groups are based in Dublin²⁶ and presided over by the Brotherhood's chief ideologue Yusuf al-Qaradawi.

Like Ghannouchi, the Qatar-based Qaradawi is widely rendered in the West as a "moderate," despite having issued fatwas condemning women's rights as "misguided" and secularism as "apostasy," and upholding the traditional death sentence for leaving Islam. He has also endorsed attacks against US troops and Iraqi and Israeli civilians, and praised Hitler for "putting the Jews in their place."²⁷

GHANNOUCHI'S WRITING IS ALSO LADEN WITH THE SAME ANTI-WESTERN THEMES THAT TYPIFY MAINSTREAM ISLAMIST DISCOURSE. DURING THE FIRST GULF WAR, GHANNOUCHI PROCLAIMED: "WE MUST WAGE UNCEASING WAR AGAINST THE AMERICANS UNTIL THEY LEAVE THE LAND OF ISLAM"

“The sixth caliphate”

Ghannouchi’s own attitudes toward Jews and Israel demonstrates the bigotry and conspiracy-mongering that typifies much of contemporary Islamist discourse. As Ghannouchi wrote in 1994, “The idea of inserting an alien polity into the very heart of the Islamic world, which would exhaust its resources and obstruct any attempt at re-forging Muslim unity, proved immediately appealing to European policymakers and served well the new Western orientation which was materialistic, secular, and obsessed with the idea of territorial expansion.”²⁸

The Israel-based Middle East analyst Martin Kramer wrote that Ghannouchi’s rejection of the Oslo Accords has been even shriller than that of mainstream Muslim Brotherhood leaders. Ghannouchi described the Israeli-Palestinian agreement as “...a Jewish-American plan encompassing the entire region, which would cleanse it of all resistance and open it to Jewish economic and cultural activity, culminating in complete Jewish hegemony from Marrakesh to Kazakhstan.” Since then, Ghannouchi has expressed unwavering

support for Hamas, and confidence that the Ummah, or global Islamic community, will one day eliminate the Zionist “cancer”. In an interview last year, he concurred with slain Hamas leader Ahmed Yassin’s prediction that the Jewish state would disappear by 2027.²⁹

Zionism, Ghannouchi said, “...spreads octopus-like over the whole planet, embracing and transforming every aspect of existence by means of its economics, communication, arts and literature... Any attempt to liberate Palestine must, therefore, seek to operate on the same global and all-encompassing level.”³⁰

Last November, Hamadi Jebali – the Ennahda figure later appointed prime minister – hosted a high-ranking Hamas official at a rally in the coastal city of Sousse. “The conquest of Jerusalem will set out from here,” Jebali said. “You are witnessing a divine, historic moment – a new era in civilization, God willing: the sixth caliphate.”³¹

Earlier this year, Ismail Haniyeh, the Hamas prime minister of Gaza, landed

EARLIER THIS YEAR, ISMAIL HANIYEH, THE HAMAS PRIME MINISTER OF GAZA, LANDED AT TUNIS AIRPORT TO A HERO’S WELCOME: THOUSANDS OF SUPPORTERS CHANTED “KILL THE JEWS – IT IS OUR DUTY.” GHANNOUCHI – WHO, ALONG WITH JEBALI, LATER HOSTED HANIYEH – ATTRIBUTED THE SLOGANS TO A FRINGE OF PROVOCATEURS SEEKING TO UNDERMINE HIS PARTY’S IMAGE, BUT ISSUED NO APOLOGY FOR HAVING WELCOMED THE HAMAS LEADER.

at Tunis Airport to a hero's welcome and thousands of supporters chanting "Kill the Jews – it is our duty." Ghannouchi – who, along with Jebali, later hosted Haniyeh – attributed the slogans to a fringe of provocateurs seeking to undermine his party's image, but issued no apology for having welcomed the Hamas leader.³² "Ennahda condemns these slogans which do not represent Islam's spirit or teachings," Ghannouchi said in a statement to the Associated Press.

Speaking at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy last November, Ghannouchi assured his hosts Ennahda does not view the US as the "Great Satan," and that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a local one that concerns the involved parties alone. "My energy and focus are

on Tunisia," he said. "Others are focused on Palestine". But welcoming Haniyeh two months later, he affirmed, "The Palestinians problem is not the problem of a Palestinian people but a problem of the Islamic nation, and Tunisia is part of that nation."³³

Caught in the middle is Tunisia's tiny Jewish population – 1,500 people, compared to its pre-1948 population of 120,000. "There are no Zionists in Tunisia and we don't want to be mixed into the problems of the Middle East," Peres Trabelsi, a Jewish community representative, said after Haniyeh's visit.³⁴ According to community president, Roger Bismuth, the crowd welcoming the Hamas leader had included not only Salafists, but Ennahda supporters as well.³⁵

An awkward dance

Ennahda's two balancing acts – appeasing both Salafists and secularists, Tunisians and the West – are proving increasingly awkward to execute. Some of its positions may be taken as inevitable compromises for a ruling political party, though others indicate how Ennahda's triangulation in effect underwrites the very extremism it claims to safeguard against.

Ennahda has alienated Salafists on occasion, to the seeming benefit of secularists and liberal Western onlookers. In May 2012, thousands of Salafists marched on the Great Mosque of Kairouan (generally considered to be Islam's fourth holiest site) in Tunisia's hinterland, chanting slogans including "We are all the children of Osama," "The revolution was made for sharia" and "Jews, Jews, the army of Mohammed is back."³⁶

Ennahda distanced itself from the rallies but did nothing to rein in their organisers. Amer Al-Arayedh, a member of the Ennahda executive, said there was "no correlation" between the Salafist movement and his own. "It is the right of the Salafists in Tunisia to organise meetings and forums like any other movement," he told the US government-sponsored website Magharebia. "The important thing is maintaining public safety and not sparking riots and civil strife."³⁷

Salafists were also livid when in March Ennahda buckled to secularist pressure and said it would not seek to base Tunisia's new constitution on sharia.⁴¹ The al-Qaida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri weighed in, calling on Tunisians to overthrow the Ennahda government: "They are inventing an Islam that pleases the US State Department, the EU, and the

sheikhdoms of the Gulf. It is an Islam upon request, that permits gambling clubs, nudist beaches, usury and secular laws."³⁸

However, Ennahda's calculations have often run the other way, adopting the same unbending dogmatism which it accuses its Salafist rivals of espousing.

In May 2011, a Tunisian court fined a private television station for airing the award-winning animated film *Persepolis*, claiming it violated Islamic strictures in its frank portrayal of sex and depiction of a white-bearded God. After protesters threatened violence outside the office of the offending channel (its owner's home was later firebombed), the head of Ennahda's political office condemned the threats, but also the "provocation" of having aired the film, which he likened to "prostitution".³⁹ And in June of this year, a 30-year-old man was sentenced to seven years in prison for posting caricatures of Mohammad on Facebook.⁴⁰

The Tunisian government has also granted a license to Hizb ut-Tahrir, an extremist pan-Islamic movement that has been banned in several other Muslim-majority countries and some non-Muslim-majority countries such as Russia and Germany.⁴¹ Hizb ut-Tahrir's Tunisian leader has described said their aim was to "...establish an Islamic Caliphate, raise Islamic awareness and lead the country to achieve radical change and the unity of the Islamic nation."⁴² The decision came a month after the government legalised the Salafist "Islah Front" party, whose inaugural conference Ghannouchi attended.⁴³

In early August, Ennahda proposed a draft bill to the Constituent Assembly

to criminalise blasphemy. If accepted, the bill would make "...insults, profanity, derision and representation of Allah and Mohammed" punishable by two years in prison, and four years for repeat offences.⁴⁴ Later that same month, it incurred the outrage of Tunisian women, thousands of whom rallied in Tunis, over Ennahda's suggested language for the draft constitution in which women are described as "complementary to men." Farida al-Obeidi, the chair of the Constituent Assembly's Human Rights and Public Freedoms panel, said that such a turn of phrase was no sign of implied inequality; rather, it meant the "sharing of roles and does not mean that women are worth less than men."⁴⁵ Tunisia's Democratic Women's Association begged to differ.

Abdul Rahman al-Rashed, the general manager of the Saudi-owned Al Arabiya

satellite channel, wrote last year that while Ennahda may have reformist elements at the top, it continues to play to a base that is fundamentally conservative. "Were the Nahda Party leaders truthful when saying 'we aspire to establish a free, open and modern society, in which every citizen enjoys equal rights?' No one knows. Yet the experiences of Iran, Sudan, Hamas and Hezbollah would suggest otherwise."⁴⁶ The University of Denver's Rob Prince, writing for the progressive Institute for Policy Studies, noted that Ennahda's base has a distinctly fundamentalist tilt. "To date, the leadership has hardly reined in the base," he wrote, "nor is it clear it wants to."⁴⁷

"Ennahda is not moderate," said the director of Tunisia's national theater. "Nobody at the United States Embassy in Tunisia was informed" about Ennahda's true nature, she said. "Nobody."⁴⁸

ENNAHDA'S TWO BALANCING ACTS - APPEASING BOTH SALAFISTS AND SECULARISTS, TUNISIANS AND THE WEST - ARE PROVING INCREASINGLY AWKWARD TO EXECUTE.

Conclusion

The Islamist parties now ascendant across the Middle East have for the most part pledged to uphold minority rights, civilian government and the rule of law. In response, Western policymakers, led by the Obama administration, have consistently given Ennahda and their Arab Spring counterparts the benefit of the doubt. "I found in Washington a great optimism about the Arab Spring, especially in Tunisia," Ghannouchi told Marc Lynch last year. "The official positions by President Obama, by Secretary of State Clinton and the ambassadors in the region in general are positive."⁴⁹

In March, Washington announced a \$100 million grant for Tunisia, and \$400 million in loan guarantees to help manage its democratic transition.⁵⁰ The funds were provided without strings attached.

In July, Ghannouchi and President Marzouki were jointly awarded the prestigious Chatham House Prize "...for the successful compromises each achieved during Tunisia's democratic transition." In awarding the prize, the organisers said: "Sheikh Ghannouchi has been widely praised for his contribution to promoting the idea of compatibility between Islam and democracy and modernity which has been translated into the promotion of a culture of tolerance and bridge-building across the political spectrum."⁵¹

As this report has shown, there is a welter of contradictory evidence that ought to stop such encomiums until Ennahda's more recent rhetoric is translated into concrete policies. Opposition to the

revival of the caliphate costs Ennahda little in a contemporary context although, by Ghannouchi's own standard, this is a long-term goal that ought not to preclude short-term dealmaking with secularists. More significant is the party's endorsement of the right of non-Muslims to achieve high office, although this must be enshrined in the Tunisian constitution if it is to mean anything at all. The recent objection to the draft constitution's definition of women should be instructive as to how linguistic sleights-of-hand can mask darker ideological agendas.

Because Tunisia's government is still only a Constituent Assembly, policy recommendations at this stage would be premature. But rough guidelines for engagement and financial support are not. Moreover, it would do justice to history and to Tunisia's electorate for both the US State Department and Western commentators to take the full measure of Rachid Ghannouchi and of how much of Tunisia's still-active opposition views his ruling party.

As the United States waits to see what kind of constitution emerges from an Ennahda-led coalition, the very least it can do is put a higher premium on democratic norms and the absolute protection of ethnic and religious minorities, women, civil society, a free press and an independent judiciary. Washington should make clear that future aid disbursements for helping with Tunisia's transition must be contingent on Ennahda's performance rather than its promise.

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