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# Tunisia's Struggle for Political Pluralism After Ennahda

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# Introduction and summary

In January, after more than two years of deliberations during which the country lurched from one crisis to the next, Tunisia's National Constituent Assembly passed one of the most progressive constitutions in the Arab world.<sup>1</sup> This hard-won victory came after protracted negotiations between Ennahda—Tunisia's largest Islamist party with links to the Muslim Brotherhood—and the non-Islamist opposition. The main political factions reached agreement on a text that excluded the explicit mention of Sharia law as the basis for legislation, bridging, at least temporarily, a divide that has polarized Islamist versus non-Islamist political camps in the North African nation. The breakthrough was especially noteworthy in light of the violent ouster of the Muslim Brotherhood-led government only seven months earlier in Egypt.

Tunisians have every right to be proud that their country's political transition since the 2011 revolution remains on track. But major security, economic, and political challenges remain. Tunisia will need substantial international assistance to solve these problems, and there is an appetite among Tunisian political actors for greater U.S. engagement. Washington's enthusiasm for engagement in Tunisia cooled after an attack on the U.S. Embassy in Tunis by an Islamist mob in September 2012.<sup>2</sup> However, the approval of Tunisia's new constitution gives the United States an opening to re-engage. Secretary of State John Kerry's February visit to Tunisia was a step in the right direction, and the upcoming visit by the new Tunisian Prime Minister Mehdi Jomaa to Washington will serve as an important opportunity for overall U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East and North Africa.

Ensuring Tunisia's successful transition to its new constitutional order will advance U.S. interests and values in the region. Next door, Libya is slipping toward internal chaos. Transnational terrorist groups seek to exploit porous national borders across North Africa. Egypt remains gripped by polarized politics and an undercurrent of anti-state violence. Syria's civil war continues unabated. Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula in Yemen presents challenges to the government there,

as well as broader regional and global security threats. Amid these regional challenges, Tunisia remains an important partner for the United States in efforts to counter terrorism and violent extremism in North Africa. Tunisia also serves as an important example of a country where Islamists and non-Islamists have so far settled their differences through politics with minimal recourse to violence.

But the United States should engage with eyes wide open. Tunisia's leading political forces have so far managed to avoid direct confrontation, but deep distrust and disagreements over its future persist between Ennahda and the country's non-Islamists. The Salafi community, which has a small but active wing of young extremist men, poses a challenge not just to Ennahda but to Tunisia as a whole. To better assess these divisions, the Center for American Progress conducted field research in Tunisia through in-depth interviews with the leadership of Ennahda; members of the Salafi community; representatives of country's main umbrella non-Islamist party, Nidaa Tunis; and several independent political analysts.

This report provides a snapshot of Tunisia's political transition around the time of the third anniversary of Tunisia's 2011 Jasmine Revolution. It examines the main Islamist and non-Islamist forces, the tensions between them, and the implications for Tunisia's future, with a focus on Ennahda as the pivotal actor of the past two years. The report takes stock of the major trends in the Salafi community, assesses the state of Ennahda-Salafi relations, and analyzes the non-Islamist opposition. It concludes with suggested recommendations for U.S. policymakers. In brief, the report's key findings include:

- **Tunisia faces continued challenges in its political transition.** Despite the agreement on the constitution, the economic and security challenges facing Tunisia's new political order are daunting. A caretaker government with limited power and unproven political legitimacy is charged with producing results for a Tunisian public impatient for tangible improvements in daily life. Substantive and deep reconciliation between Islamist and non-Islamist political forces remains elusive.
- **Ennahda is focused on getting its own house in order.** The abrupt transition from exile and prison to political office left Ennahda little time to build internal strategic consensus. Historical divisions have become more pronounced as the Ennahda rank and file struggle to understand the party leadership's decisions over the past year to voluntarily surrender control of the government and support a constitution that makes no reference to Sharia. Bridging these internal divides and building cohesion will be a major focus for Ennahda going forward.

- **Ennahda is leaving office, not power.** Ennahda remains the most powerful bloc in the National Constituent Assembly with 90 seats out of 217 seats.<sup>3</sup> Ennahda maintains a relatively robust election infrastructure, which it is mobilizing for the elections later this year. The leadership sees a natural role for the movement in parliamentary opposition. Most observers consider Ennahda well positioned to capture the second-largest block of votes in the next election, and the Islamist movement will likely remain a significant political force.
- **The struggle over the role of religion in Tunisia's transition continues.** Ennahda's decision to back away from the inclusion of Sharia in the constitution paved the way for a final agreement, but many in Ennahda and the broader Islamist camp are unhappy with the result and are likely to press for a different outcome in the next stages of Tunisia's transition. Ennahda may now look to pass legislation in parliament on key religious issues that they could not write into the constitution.
- **Salafi frustration is on the rise.** Salafis appear unified in their frustration and disdain for the path of conciliation that Ennahda chose regarding Sharia law in the constitution and handing over power to a technocratic government. Nonviolent Salafi activists consider Ennahda weak-willed and are sympathetic to their Salafi jihadi counterparts. If their views are reflective of the wider Salafi community, a more militant Salafi current may be on the rise with Ennahda in its crosshairs.
- **Tunisia's ascendant non-Islamists are prone to fracturing.** Tunisia's non-Islamist political parties and organizations are unified in opposition to the country's Islamists under the banner of Nidaa Tunis. However, there is little else holding this coalition together. Constituent parties and individual members are at odds on policy matters and vocal in their suspicion of each other. There are signs that the coalition is already beginning to fracture.
- **The state bureaucracy and civil service remain a potential flashpoint.** Ennahda appointments to key government ministries were part of a strategy to gain influence over the civil service. Non-Islamists and some civil servants saw the appointments as an effort to Islamize the state and may seek to purge those who remain. This issue could become the next front in the standoff between non-Islamists and Ennahda.

Washington should consider taking the following steps in order to help consolidate Tunisia's continued democratic transition:

- **Enhance U.S. diplomatic engagement.** The United States should recognize the recent accomplishments of Tunisia's transition through the establishment of a strategic dialogue on the occasion of Tunisian Prime Minister Jomaa's visit to Washington this month. The United States should continue to build diplomatic momentum by establishing a framework and benchmarks for eventually elevating this dialogue to a strategic partnership. On the ground, U.S. diplomats should seek to broaden and deepen the dialogue through political and civil society outreach and economic statecraft. Support should be provided to ensure that Tunisia can hold the next round of elections before the end of 2014.
- **Mobilize economic assistance from bilateral and multilateral donors.** The United States should mobilize donors around a shared plan to shore up the Tunisian economy, building on the \$1.7 billion in aid recently unlocked by the international financial institutions, or IFIs.<sup>4</sup> The United States should bolster its own bilateral economic assistance while coordinating with France and the Gulf states to deepen their engagement. The United States should also signal its intent to pursue a free trade agreement with Tunisia, while encouraging the European Union to do the same.
- **Bolster U.S. assistance to help combat extremist violence.** The United States should review the level of support it provides to the Tunisian military and security services in their efforts to combat extremist violence. Additional U.S. security assistance could include equipment, joint military exercises, activities of the U.S.-Tunisian Joint Military Commission, and resources to better protect and manage Tunisia's borders.
- **Increase support to security and justice sector reform.** The United States, together with its EU partners, should engage the Tunisian government to design and implement a comprehensive program to professionalize the country's security and justice sectors and to bring these institutions under the control of Tunisia's elected officials. The United States should increase its financial commitment to this effort beyond the \$24 million so far provided to the Tunisian Interior Ministry.<sup>5</sup>

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