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Tunisia's Struggle for Political Pluralism After Ennahda

By Hardin Lang, Mokhtar Awad, Peter Juul, and Brian Katulis April 2014

Center for American Progress



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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.¹ 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 2012.² 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.³ 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.⁴ 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.⁵

Tunisia's political transition since 2011

In January 2011, the self-immolation of a Tunisian street vendor sparked a popular uprising that ousted Tunisia's decades-old authoritarian rule in a matter of weeks.⁶ Ennahda—Tunisia's leading political Islamist group with roots in the Muslim Brotherhood movement (see text box on page 10 for more background)—reacted cautiously to a political uprising driven by youth activists that quickly swept Tunisia. But by the time the country went to the polls in October 2011, Ennahda had organized to win 90 seats out of 217 seats in the new National Constituent Assembly, or NCA. The remainder of the vote was split among a field of 18 secular parties.⁷ Ennahda built a coalition with two non-Islamist parties, the Congress for the Republic and Ettakatol, in the NCA and formed a government. The NCA undertook to draft a new constitution within a year.

Two years later, Ennahda and its partners had little to show for their time in office. The drafting of the constitution lagged dangerously behind schedule because of polarized debates between Islamist and non-Islamist camps. The government was unable to show progress on the economy. Violence by Islamist terrorist groups and a wave of Salafi vigilantism rattled Tunisian society.⁸ Tensions peaked with the assassinations of two secular politicians, Chokri Belaid and Mohamed Brahmi, in 2013. That summer, Tunisians once again took to the streets—this time, with Ennahda in their sights.

Under pressure, Ennahda agreed to a national dialogue and to step down in favor of a technocratic government in September 2013.⁹ This national dialogue was conducted under the auspices of the country's powerful trade unions and resulted in a settlement to finalize a new constitution and hold new elections. Ennahda handed over power to a caretaker technocratic government in January 2014, leaving Tunisia saddled with economic and security problems.

Economic woes

Popular grievances over Tunisia's economic woes fueled the 2011 uprising. Three years on, the economy has yet to turn a corner. Despite falling from 2011 highs, Tunisia's unemployment rate remained at 15.7 percent in the last quarter of 2013¹⁰—more than 2 percentage points higher than Egypt's unemployment rate. Gross domestic product, or GDP, growth slowed to 2.7 percent at the end of 2013, one percentage point lower than the previous year.¹¹ Foreign direct investment remains below pre-2011 levels. The World Bank estimates a fiscal deficit for 2013 of 6.2 percent of GDP.¹² This deficit is due primarily to increased public wages and subsidies, which tripled between 2010 and 2013.¹³

In early January, an attempt by the new technocratic government to impose new tax hikes led to sporadic rioting that left one person dead.¹⁴ According to Prime Minister Jomaa, the state will need to borrow \$7.5 billion to cover its current deficit.¹⁵ In the meantime, economic stratification between Tunisia's more developed coastline and the country's undeveloped interior continues to widen. Robust black markets are helping Tunisians get around currency restrictions, rising inflation, and food costs. A measure of relief is on the way. In response to the deal on the constitution and the appointment of a caretaker government, the World Bank approved \$1.2 billion in funds, including \$750 million for government reforms, \$300 million for decentralization, and \$100 million for a small and medium enterprise credit facility.¹⁶ Additionally, the International Monetary Fund, or IMF, released \$500 million in funds after the new prime minister was sworn in.¹⁷

The rise of religious violence

Since 2011, Tunisia has faced a rash of vigilantism, assassination, and terrorism conducted by a number of Islamist groups. The main threat is Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia, or AST, an Al Qaeda-affiliated Salafist group that has been held responsible for the assassinations of secular politicians Chokri Belaid and Mohamed Brahmi.¹⁸ AST is also believed responsible for or involved in the September 2012 attack on the U.S. Embassy in Tunis and attacks on Tunisian soldiers. More generally, since 2011, Salafi vigilantes have harassed, intimidated, and attacked women, secularists, media professionals, religious minorities, teachers, and civil society activists in order to impose their own religious norms on Tunisian society.¹⁹ As late as February 2014, angry unemployed protesters burned down an Ennahda office, a courthouse, and a police station.²⁰ The country's military and security services are poised to go on the offensive against Islamist radicals in the country's mountainous Chaambi region.

A tough road ahead

The challenges for Tunisia's new democracy are daunting. The new Tunisian constitution dictates that elections must be held in 2014 to replace the current NCA and caretaker government. In the interim, Tunisians are impatient for results. A shock to the economy or another major security incident could destabilize the country. An unelected caretaker government with limited power and influence is charged with the everyday management of the country. These dynamics raise questions about the political sustainability and legitimacy of the current arrangement. Despite the passage of a constitution, substantive reconciliation between Islamist and non-Islamist political forces remains elusive. Tunisians have succeeded when they have been able to reach across the divides in their society. But two years of political turmoil have left cleavages in the country's social fabric. Islamists and non-Islamists remain deeply suspicious of each other. While the latter are ascendant, the former are far from vanquished. It is not clear that either will be in a mood to compromise going forward.

Political maneuvering in preparation for the 2014 elections

Tunisia's many political factions are already maneuvering in anticipation of a highly competitive and decisive poll. Tunisia's secular factions will be critical in determining the fate of the country's most popular non-Islamist party: Nidaa Tunis. Nidaa will now have to contend with far left and center-left parties that regard it as a vestige of the old regime and hold different economic agendas. A small group of parties close to the old regime will likely gravitate closer to Nidaa Tunis. Other parties may move to form centrist and leftist breakaway coalitions. Ennahda may join ranks with its former Troika coalition partners—the Ettakatol and Congress for the Republic parties. But its recent political misfortunes and current focus on internal consolidation temper Ennahda's prospects at the polls. In this environment, neither Ennahda nor Nidaa Tunis are likely to secure a comfortable majority.

Troubles from Tunisia's difficult neighborhood loom

Tunisia is buffeted by unrest to its east and south. Libya remains unstable, with a weak government incapable of reining in militias and terrorist groups. Al Qaeda-inspired terrorist groups maneuver in the Sahel on Tunisia's southern tip. North Africa is a pipeline for smuggling and weapons trafficking for these groups from Mali to Syria and beyond. AST benefits from Tunisia's proximity to this network in its own efforts to destabilize the country.

To the east, Egypt faces low-level violence amid increasingly polarized politics. Gulf countries seek greater influence in Tunisia, as evidenced by Prime Minister Jomaa's first high-profile trip to the Gulf.²¹ Ennahda's critics charge that the party soured relations with some in the Gulf over ideological and political disputes. After its exit, countries opposed to the Muslim Brotherhood such as the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia now appear eager to assist Tunisia. Even Qatar, believed by Ennahda's critics to be the party's financier, is exploring opportunities to invest in Tunisia.

Ennahda: Pragmatic adaptability in Tunisia's transition

Unlike its counterpart in Egypt, the Freedom and Justice Party, Ennahda has demonstrated a strong degree of adaptability and pragmatism in its approach to Tunisia's political transition. Ennahda's leadership recognizes the need for pluralism and compromise for the country's transition to succeed. As Ennahda senior leader Abdel Meguid al-Naggar noted, "There are a number of actions that we could have taken outside of consensus. We could have passed a constitution on our own. We could have passed the number of pieces of legislation on our own ... but we chose to engage other parties."²² Ennahda member of parliament, or MP, Ferida Labidi reinforced the point, saying "We had a constitution ready months ago, but we decided not to push it through with our majority. ... We did not try to force our will."²³ She went on to add that "Ennahda wanted the democratic process to succeed and so [we] gave concessions."²⁴

Compromising under pressure

Ennahda's leaders are keen to point out that there was no option other than giving concessions in the polarized political environment in which the party governed. As party Vice President Abdel Fatah Morou remarked:

*We gave concessions because we found ourselves in an awkward position. We only conceded because of the pressure. And we chose not to confront this pressure with violence of our own, but in a way that had the good of the country in mind.*²⁵

The experience left a bitter taste in the leadership's mouth and made them deeply distrustful of a secular opposition willing to jeopardize the transition in order to see the Islamists fail. Ennahda President Rachid Ghannouchi argued that the movement's opponents "wanted to mobilize the street and use social and economic problems to seed and spread chaos."²⁶ These elites, according to Ghannouchi, do not believe that "Islamists are citizens and have equal rights."²⁷ Ennahda's Vice President Morou was more pessimistic, stating that "[some secularists] want to completely exterminate Ennahda from the political scene."²⁸

History of Ennahda in Tunisia

The start of organized Islamist activity in Tunisia came in the early 1970s in reaction to the perceived rapid secularization of President Habib Bourguiba. Islamists who would later found Ennahda began organizing by publishing a magazine called *al-Maarifa*, or knowledge. The focus of these early Tunisian Islamists was on preaching. By 1981, they declared themselves as the Movement for Islamic Tendency, or MTI, and sought official registration as a political party.²⁹ The Tunisian government was quick to respond, and in an effort to stem the tide of Islamist movements, arrested MTI founder Rachid Ghannouchi and many followers.

In the following decade, the MTI organized demonstrations that at times turned violent. In August 1987, the authorities accused MTI of a plot to overthrow the government and for planning terrorist attacks.³⁰ It subsequently sentenced MTI leaders and activists, including recent Ennahda Prime Ministers Hamadi Jebali and Ali Larayedh, to prison. Later in 1987, 76 MTI members, including police, army, and customs officers were arrested for allegedly plotting the assassination of Tunisian officials.³¹

When Ben Ali replaced Bourguiba in a bloodless coup later that year, MTI voiced support for the new regime. It changed its name to Ennahda, meaning Renaissance, in 1988 and ran in the 1989 elections. The Tunisian government cracked down on Ennahda once again, accusing the movement of supporting terrorist attacks and violence and forcing many movement leaders, including Ghannouchi, into exile.³² Throughout the 1990s, the Tunisian government continued to blame Ennahda for violence in the country and accused the party of plotting coups and the assassination of Ben Ali.

With many of its leaders behind bars in Tunisia, Ennahda's leadership in exile carried on the work of the movement. Their first congress abroad was held in Belgium in 1996. In 2005, Ennahda began to coordinate with the non-Islamist Tunisian opposition abroad. Party leaders have acknowledged that they were in talks with the Ben Ali regime on political reform and possible reintegration prior to the 2011 revolution, which surprised Ennahda.

The coup in Egypt in July 2013 provided an added impetus. Many in the leadership observed that former Egyptian President Mohammed Morsi's ouster affected the perception of the balance of power in Tunisia. As senior Ennahda leader al-Naggar observed, "What happened in Egypt had a big impact in Tunisia ... it has weakened us."³³ Those in opposition raised their demands on Ennahda once the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood was forcibly removed from office. "The coup in Cairo forced us to make concessions here at the negotiating table in Tunis,"³⁴ he continued. Similarly, Ennahda Shura Council member Lofti Zaytoun argued the Egyptian coup "convinced us to quickly find a solution" to Tunisia's growing political impasse.³⁵

Ennahda points to its decisions to enter the national dialogue, compromise on the question of Sharia in the constitution, and ultimately surrender the executive as evidence of its commitment to the good of the country over the movement's political fortunes. However, Ennahda's critics charge that the movement's Islamist ideology precludes a genuine commitment to democracy and pluralism. For these critics,

Ennahda's compromises constitute short-term tactical moves taken in response to an existential threat. But motivations may matter less than the resulting pattern of behavior. Ennahda's conduct took place largely inside the framework of the transitional political process. The movement remained cool headed and sensitive to local power dynamics. Unlike the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Ennahda chose a path that kept the Islamists inside politics and the transition on track.

Shortcomings and internal divisions

Ennahda leaders acknowledge that the movement shoulders some of the blame for setbacks during their time in government. They note that inexperience and lack of expertise contributed to their inability to tackle the country's security and economic challenges. But they attribute these shortcomings to the repression and political exclusion that Ennahda suffered at the hands of the previous regime. Party spokesperson Ziad Ladhari explained, "It was not easy to deal with [terrorism] because we did not have experience in government. The majority of our people were forbidden from being part of the bureaucracy ... many of us were discovering these institutions."³⁶ Another senior Ennahda leader, Lotfi Zeitoun, added, "We entered government without any experience. There was also our lack of knowledge with the mechanism of the Tunisian administration."³⁷

Part of the problem lay in Ennahda's historical divisions. The Ben Ali regime effectively broke the movement into two camps: the exiles who fled Tunisia and those who remained. Those in exile developed an agenda more palatable to audiences in the Western and Arab countries where they sought refuge. The Ennahda members who remained in Tunisia were arrested and isolated by Ben Ali's security services, becoming relatively more driven by the organization's core Islamist ideology.

In 2011, Ennahda had little time to bridge this internal divide. Members living in exile returned to join those emerging from a decade or more of imprisonment and secrecy. Often unknown to each other, these constituencies came together to compete in the elections. Debates about the direction and purpose of the movement were shelved. The party spokesperson, Ziad Ladhari reflected, "We did not find enough time for us to resolve our organizational problems and to structure our party or our movement ... we did not have enough time to talk to our people."³⁸ Ennahda President Rachid Ghannouchi perhaps best summarized the situation:

*It is true that our development was very fast. We came from 50 countries and 27 prisons, and we organized ourselves in about 9 months ... we organized ourselves and our program and we went to power without real preparation. We committed many mistakes and so we need to rest and contemplate about our experience.*³⁹

Challenge from the base

Ennahda's two years in government aggravated these divisions. The movement's conservative base grew increasingly dissatisfied with the leadership's compromises while in power. Many considered the political concessions as a dangerous sign of weakness in the face of a revanchist elite tied to the old regime. MP Farida Labidi explained, "There is great pressure from our constituents and our base because they only see us giving concessions. This saga of concessions cannot continue. The base of Ennahda is not always going to accept this."⁴⁰ This base seemingly holds a majoritarian view of democracy; that is to say if Ennahda wins a vote, it has the right to govern as it sees fit. As Labidi remarked, "They say it is not our right to give these concessions."⁴¹ Younger Ennahda followers were particularly frustrated. Said Ferjani, a senior advisor and member of Ennahda's Shura Council, noted that the party youth were close to rebellion in light of a "constant stream" of Ennahda concessions.⁴²

The Ennahda leadership hopes to address the frustration of the base through better internal communication and understanding. They hope that a process of internal dialogue between the leadership and the rank and file will help resolve the divide. Ennahda Vice President Abdel Fatah Morou contended that the base's rejection of the concessions signals a lack of "political maturity" that would dissipate with "discussion and debate."⁴³ Similarly, Ennahda President Ghannouchi argued that the movement needed "to withdraw to rethink our program and our organization."⁴⁴ Ennahda was already dedicating resources to defusing these tensions. Ennahda communications directors noted that the leadership held regular town-hall-style meetings with the base on a local level.⁴⁵

Leaving office, not power

Despite a retreat from government and internal divisions, Ennahda remains well positioned to influence the next phase of Tunisia's transition. A major focus for the party will be the legislature. As party spokesperson Ziad Ladehri noted, "There is only one coherent bloc in the NCA, and that is Ennahda. The rest are all divided."⁴⁶ The party's strategists remain confident in their ability to secure a major victory in the upcoming parliamentary elections. Ennahda's head of communications asserted that "no one in the opposition has [Ennahda's] ability to mobilize for elections"⁴⁷ and mount a serious door-to-door campaign. Many in the party believe that only a strong political presence will defend Ennahda and its base from the threat of a return to the difficult days of the previous regime.

Ennahda may seek to check the powers of the interim government from its position in the NCA. Spokesperson Ladehri explained that the authority of the technocratic cabinet does not extend beyond "emergencies"⁴⁸ and does not allow it to take on major issues such as transitional justice that require an elected government with a popular mandate. As the dominant force in the NCA, Ennahda retains a say in the new cabinet's decisions and may combat attempts to reverse Ennahda appointments to key ministries. The party also says it will move to ensure and protect the neutrality of the next electoral commission in order to preserve what Ennahda considers to be the comparative advantage of its electoral ground game. If there is a political silver lining in the retreat, it is that others must now show progress in areas where Ennahda failed.

Internal reform will also be high on Ennahda's agenda. A senior Ennahda leader admitted:

There is a need to reassess the organization of our movement. We need to create leadership elite. We need members who are competent in civil administration with the capability to perform the functions of government at a technical level ... We also need a true program or plan for governing.⁴⁹

There is also recognition of the need to involve youth and to think ahead about the future leaders of the movement who may not have shared the same experiences as the current ones. The senior leader noted, "Our problem now is with the head [senior leadership] of the party. The head has to evolve to make room for the youth of the party to grow ... We are everywhere in society, and we must take advantage of that."⁵⁰

Taking the Islamist agenda forward

While Ennahda did give ground on the issue of Sharia, the movement is unlikely to drop religion and moral values from its legislative agenda. Ghannouchi dismisses the need for Sharia to be explicit in the new constitution, saying “members of parliament ... explain their Islam through what they legislate, meaning that members of parliament will translate Sharia as they understand it via the legislative process.”⁵¹ Ennahda may seek to codify via ordinary legislation what it could not write into the constitution. The movement has already submitted controversial bills that cover areas ranging from mosque regulation to the reintroduction of the Islamic system of endowments, or Awqaf.⁵² In this way, Ennahda seeks to avoid direct confrontation with Tunisia’s non-Islamists while remaining true to its values.

More broadly, Ennahda appears to be taking a long view of the Islamist project. A recurring theme of Ghannouchi and other Ennahda leaders is the need for Islamist “education” of Tunisian society. Once educated, party leaders believe Tunisians would welcome Ennahda and its ideological program. The timescale for this so-called “educational project” to “reform the citizen” remains unclear, though party Vice President Morou suggested a period of 20 to 25 years.⁵³ Ennahda believes that time is on its side and that the Tunisian people are fundamentally predisposed to its agenda. As Ennahda party spokesperson Ziad Ladhari explained:

*The Tunisian people are very conservative, and conservative people vote for conservative parties. We are the most representative of our people, Islamic parties are closer to their people ... Ennahda’s message is easily understandable by anyone. Ennahda will be the major political force for a long time.*⁵⁴

Tunisia's Salafis punch above their weight

Since January 2011, Tunisia's relatively small Salafi community has had significant impact on Tunisia's domestic politics. While most Salafis focus on preaching and charity, activist Salafis have made their presence felt through electoral politics, vigilantism, and terrorism. The highest-profile Salafi group—Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia—is thought to be responsible for the worst of the country's political and terrorist violence. Other Salafis have taken Islamic law into their own hands through vigilantism, with a small but growing group organizing politically or in civil society. Ennahda views their Salafi brethren largely as a community that can be co-opted through dialogue and education. But Salafi frustration is on the rise. Many are unhappy with Ennahda's compromise on Sharia in the constitution and decision to hand over power to a non-Islamist technocratic government. How this frustration manifests going forward will most certainly affect Tunisia's fragile transition.

Ennahda's approach to the Salafis

Ennahda and Salafis enjoy a complicated relationship. Initially, Ennahda relied on dialogue and outreach, encouraging Salafis to organize political parties. Ennahda views Salafism as a phenomenon imported from the Gulf region with followers they can convert to Ennahda's brand of moderate Islam. Ennahda Shura Council member Abdel Meguid al-Naggar attributes the rise of Salafism to the previous regime's repression of Ennahda and the loss of prominence of Tunisia's leading religious institutions. Ennahda holds that Salafi movements can be moderated through discussion and adherents integrated under the party's watchful eye. Al-Naggar explained that in his view, "over time, the Salafi current will moderate and disappear ... When stability comes, [Ennahda] can once again begin to preach and [Salafis] will moderate."⁵⁵

Despite the shift toward a security-first approach vis-à-vis AST, Ennahda remains convinced that engagement is the most effective strategy to manage the Salafi community. As late as December 2013, Vice President Morou insisted that Salafis need to be “re-educated” as “many of them have deficiency in education ... they don’t understand Arabic or understand the Quran.”⁵⁶ He describes the violent vigilantism of some Salafis as “their way of saying we want [our] rights and to say that [they are] marginalized.”⁵⁷ A senior Ennahda leader attributed Salafi-related violence to “social conditions, unemployment, and other such challenges, including the lack of political freedoms during the previous regime.”⁵⁸

Politicized Salafis seek to exploit possible political openings created by Ennahda’s willingness to compromise

For its part, many in the Salafi community appear to be losing patience with Ennahda’s willingness to compromise with the non-Islamist camp. This shift is perhaps most obvious among the small but growing constellation of Salafi political parties. The Reform Front is Tunisia’s first and largest Salafi party. Mohamed Khouja, a reformed jihadi, founded the Reform Front in 2011 at the encouragement of Ennahda.⁵⁹ In 2012, two more Salafi parties were recognized: Asalah, meaning authenticity, and Rahma, meaning mercy. The Reform Front has been traditionally seen as loyal to Ennahda. However, Ennahda’s retreat from office and support for the constitution has drawn this relationship into question. There are signs that the Reform Front sees an opportunity in the weakness of its fellow Islamists. Referring to the next election, Khouja noted:

*Our project is resonating especially as Ennahda is retreating in popularity. When we present our project to people, they say this is the true Islamic project. Many who are disappointed with Ennahda call us [to join]. Dialogue and convincing others is our strategy. Ennahda’s problem is that it was not honest with people about the nature of the problems it faced.*⁶⁰

This shift in discourse is also evident with the Salafi Asalah Party. In November 2012, the party’s spokesperson referred to a plot by old regime elements to sour relations between Ennahda and Salafis, underscoring that “Salafis do not oppose Ennahda.”⁶¹ By contrast, Asalah denounced the Ennahda-backed constitution as a “coup against legitimacy, disobedience of sacred laws, and a betrayal of the blood of the martyrs.”⁶² Sheikh Mawldi Ali El-Moujahed, president of the Asalah Party, dubbed the passing of the constitution “a turning point” in the relationship with Ennahda, insisting that the party would suffer the consequences:

*The pressure will come from their base. People do not understand how dissatisfied they are. A 'white' coup took place, and Ennahda simply rolled over to the secularists. The people's voice will be heard ... There is a voice for Sharia in Tunisia. Tunisia is a Muslim country and will be ruled by Islam—there is no other way.*⁶³

Salafi violence

Salafis have most visibly affected Tunisia through the use of vigilante and terrorist violence. Their vigilantism has included physical attacks against unveiled women, secularists, television directors and programmers, artists, and civil society activists. They have also attempted to seize control of university campuses, cinemas, television stations, and both Muslim and Christian houses of worship. These acts have succeeded in intimidating many institutions and individuals, with the Tunisian government either unable or unwilling to prevent or prosecute Salafi vigilantism.⁶⁴

History of terrorism in Tunisia

Terrorism carried out by militant Islamists is nothing new to Tunisia. Tunisian nationals have long been connected to international terrorist groups and attacks. In the 1980s and 1990s, the Ben Ali regime cracked down on Ennahda, all but eliminating political space for Islamists. During that time, the country suffered a spate of bomb attacks and assassination attempts allegedly perpetrated by Ennahda activists.⁶⁵ The state responded with a series of harsh anti-terrorism measures that resulted in a decade of relative quiet at home, as Tunisian militants looked elsewhere for opportunities.

The Tunisian Combatant Group, or TCG, for example, developed direct operational ties with Al Qaeda in Afghanistan. Its operatives carried out the now famous suicide attack against Northern Alliance leader General Ahmad Shah Mas'ud.⁶⁶ The following year, an Al Qaeda-affiliated suicide bomber attacked Tunisia's oldest Jewish synagogue in the southern province of Djerba, killing 21 and injuring dozens more.⁶⁷ TCG has also recruited individuals to fight for Al Qaeda.⁶⁸ TCG's founders, Abu Iyadh and Tarek Maaroufi,⁶⁹ both later returned to Tunisia after the 2011 revolution and established AST.

Scores of Tunisians have trained with the Algeria-based Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat, or GSPC. The Kasserine region along Tunisia's border with Algeria became a major hub of GSPC activity in the early 2000s as the flow of militants and cross-border smuggling intensified. Kasserine is home to Chaambi Mountain, which remains the focus of Tunisia's efforts to combat terrorism. Tunisian authorities reported numerous gun battles in the area in the early 2000s. By 2006 and 2007, these skirmishes had intensified and resulted in minor losses on both sides.⁷⁰ By this time, GSPC affiliates had reportedly expanded its geographic footprint inside Tunisia, establishing training camps in the Ressass and Boukornine mountains only 30 kilometers south of downtown Tunis.⁷¹ In 2007, GSPC joined forces with other groups to form Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghrib, or AQIM.

Hardened Tunisian extremists took advantage of the 2011 revolution to return home. Others were released from prison under a general amnesty shortly after the revolution.⁷² Today, the Tunisian authorities report that Tunisian jihadists have set up a new AQIM-affiliated group by the name of the Uqba ibn Nafi brigade in the Chaambi Mountain of the Kasserine region.⁷³

Salafi vigilantism has been overshadowed by terrorism, widely attributed to AST. Even political and civil society-oriented Salafis view AST members with considerable charity. Sheikh Ali El-Moujahed characterized AST members as “very good people who only do Da’wa and very productive things ... We work with anyone who is not doing violence and we discourage those who do.”⁷⁴ Reform Front Party head Mohamed Khouja referred to them as “our sons” who needed religious guidance.⁷⁵ He further denied that the Ennahda-led Tunisian government had the right to classify AST as a terrorist organization, claiming that the group was a “sacrificial lamb to appease others.” Similarly, a Salafi activist and high-profile supporter of AST simultaneously implied that AST was not responsible for the attacks attributed to it and that being designated a terrorist organization by the United States “is a badge of honor.”⁷⁶ These nonviolent Salafi parties and nongovernmental organizations appear to sympathize with the overall goals of AST while exonerating it from any accusations of terrorism.

Tensions are on the rise between those Salafis sympathetic to AST and Ennahda. A Salafi civil society leader formally active with AST labeled Ennahda a traitor to the Islamist project. In his view, AST had been targeted because it posed a threat to the older Islamist organization: “Ennahda is 40 years old, and AST is only three years old and is already a competing force in the street and for youth.”⁷⁷ For this Salafi leader, the Ennahda experience proved that revolution is the only way in order to bring about the Islamic state. “Reaching power does not mean that you will rule. You cannot implement the Islamic project in this environment. We used to say these things theoretically, now there is proof.”⁷⁸

AST and these sympathetic activists attempt to capitalize on the frustration felt by many Salafis after Ennahda’s exit from power and the new constitution. Salafi activists and even younger members of some Salafi political parties are keen to point out that AST is misunderstood. The pro-AST activist elaborated that “[one] need[s] to understand that AST revolutionized jihadi thought. It is now soft jihad, of Da’wa and charity, but I cannot say more.”⁷⁹

It is this so-called “soft jihad” that AST and other Salafi jihadis will have to undertake as the crackdown intensifies. Part of this soft-jihad approach is a reliance on charity and medical caravans as well as political agitation focusing on “exposing corruption and lies.”⁸⁰ AST fits into this populist equation because it is “part of the Tunisian people ... and opposed to the system.”⁸¹ A similar shift in rhetoric was also evident in AST’s statement calling on Tunisians to protest on the anniversary of the start of the revolution in December 2013. In that statement, AST observed, “This conflict is not of one group or organization, but that of the people.”⁸²

Nidaa Tunis and the opposition

Tunisia's political spectrum contains a diversity of non-Islamist voices. In the 2011 election, Ennahda's share of the vote was 41 percent.⁸³ The vast majority of the remainder went to a mix of fractured secularist, leftist, communist, and old-regime elements split into more than a dozen parties. Most of these non-Islamist groups are represented in a coalition currently spearheaded by the Nidaa Tunis party and are eager to take political advantage of Ennahda's recent travails. Since its founding in June 2012, Nidaa Tunis—or “Call for Tunisia”—has become the main non-Islamist coalition in Tunisian politics. Led by the widely popular former Prime Minister Beji Caid Essebsi, Nidaa Tunis is a coalition of liberal and leftist parties and members of the former ruling Constitutional Democratic Rally, or RCD.⁸⁴ It was founded in an attempt to counter the widespread popularity of Ennahda and bring together the disparate votes of secular and leftist parties.

Tunisia's non-Islamists express fears over Ennahda's relationship with Salafis—particularly those engaged in violence—and its alleged packing of the state bureaucracy with apparatchiks. These fears are expressed at varying volumes, but they are generally consistent across non-Islamist interlocutors. It ultimately remains unclear what unites these non-Islamist forces beyond an opposition to Ennahda specifically, Islamists in general, and the fear of the institutionalization of Sharia law.

Tunisia's battle of ideas: The divide between Islamists and non-Islamists on multiple fronts

Non-Islamist parties almost universally view Ennahda as soft on terrorism. In the words of former Prime Minister Essebsi, “The previous Ennahda government did not have a will to combat these terrorists, and they were sympathetic to Salafis.”⁸⁵ One left-wing member of parliament accused the Ennahda-led Justice Ministry of obstructing justice on terrorism cases.⁸⁶ Some went so far as to accuse Ennahda of having direct ties with Ansar al-Sharia. A Nidaa Tunis executive officer said, “[Ennahda's] flag is the black flag of Al Qaeda, not the Tunisian flag.”⁸⁷ However, not all non-Islamists go so far in their views of Ennahda's relationship to violent Islamists; others appear to view Ennahda as an enabler rather than a co-conspirator.

An equally universal concern among non-Islamists vis-à-vis Ennahda is the latter's perceived effort to stack the state bureaucracy with loyalists. Non-Islamists viewed these appointments as an effort to cement Ennahda's control over the state apparatus even as it left government, and as weakening the state by replacing civil servants with incompetent bureaucrats loyal to Ennahda. As Essebsi put it, Ennahda "tried to infiltrate the ministries and they appointed incompetent political people ... Basically, the administrative functions of the state have failed over the past two years of Ennahda rule."⁸⁸ The new prime minister has already responded to these concerns by replacing 18 of Tunisia's 24 governors in an effort to "overhaul the administration."⁸⁹ This issue has the potential to become the next front in the standoff between Nidaa Tunis and Ennahda.

Tunisia's bureaucracy largely aligned with non-Islamists in the ideological struggle

Reports from members of the state bureaucracy appear to corroborate at least some non-Islamist concerns over Ennahda. A leader from the national police union, for instance, alleged that some factions of Ennahda had "interfered with the security apparatus" to the benefit of extremists.⁹⁰ While the particulars of these allegations cannot be verified, a Tunisian judicial union representative stated that defendants in the U.S. Embassy attack in 2012 were tried under laws governing protests rather than those outlawing terrorism, and "virtually everyone involved" walked after six months in prison or less.⁹¹

A recently retired brigadier general in the Tunisian army went further, outlining the Defense Ministry's effort to thwart Ennahda infiltration. The general explained that the Defense Ministry "systematically refused"⁹² Ennahda's requests to reappoint hundreds of military officers who were purged, discharged by the former regime for suspected ties with Ennahda. He was critical of Ennahda's performance in combating terrorism and underscored the rise in tension between the Defense Ministry and the government as violence escalated in the Chaambi Mountain region—a stronghold for Islamic militants near the Algerian border. According to the general, who considers Ennahda to be Tunisia's Muslim Brotherhood, "Ansar al-Sharia is originally from the Muslim Brotherhood—all of these groups exploded from the belly of the Brotherhood."⁹³

Professional union leaders strongly criticized the Ennahda appointments to the Ministries of Justice and Interior. In particular, the head of the Tunisian judicial union criticized the Ennahda-led Justice Ministry's dismissal of 82 judges in May 2013, saying that half of the jurists were dismissed for violating Islamist moral norms such as drinking alcohol in public.⁹⁴ Characterizing the dismissals as a "purge," the judicial syndicate head further alleged that Ennahda used the ousters as a "fear tactic" so that it could take "control of the judiciary."⁹⁵ His view was that Ennahda intended to seed the Tunisian judiciary with magistrates who would rule favorably when Islamist-inspired laws were challenged in the courts.

No clear and practical plan for Tunisia's economy

The non-Islamists interviewed for this report all shared concern over the state of the economy. In the words of leftist MP Hesham Hosny, the Tunisian economy "is in a downward spiral and bleeding out."⁹⁶ The incompetence of Ennahda's appointees, Hosny and others argued, was a primary cause of the country's financial problems. As the drafter of Nidaa Tunis' economic platform, Mahmoud ben Ramadan put it this way:

In every [economic] field, the situation today is worse than it was before the revolution ... The administration has been destroyed by Ennahda because they appointed their guys there, they put [in] unskilled people—including [in] public enterprises.⁹⁷

But Nidaa Tunis and the rest of the secular opposition are short on solutions, offering little in the way of specific programs or policies apart from removing Ennahda bureaucrats. Instead, they look to donor communities to help bail out Tunisia. Ben Ramadan observed that out of Tunisia's 28 billion dinar budget, 8 billion dinars would have to come from foreign aid.⁹⁸ Essebsi indicated that Tunisia would look to the United States to encourage American businessmen to invest in Tunisia now that Ennahda has left power. The former prime minister also stated that once in power, Nidaa Tunis would seek "the full backing of the international community" to help with Tunisia's economy.⁹⁹

Ascendant—but for how long?

Non-Islamist forces are ascendant, but fearful. They fear Islamist terrorism and Ennahda's penetration of the state bureaucracy. Professional syndicate leaders share the latter concern. The status and role of the judiciary are a particular point of concern for non-Islamists, who fear that Ennahda is attempting to control it. Some non-Islamists go so far as to accuse Ennahda of conspiring with terrorist organizations, but there is a more widespread concern, one also shared in some Western capitals, that Ennahda turns a blind eye to violent Islamists such as Ansar al-Sharia.

But not much holds the non-Islamist coalition together beyond general opposition to Ennahda and the Salafi community. Many on the Tunisian left are opposed to both Nidaa Tunis and Ennahda. As national dialogue talks were underway in December 2013, leftist MP Hosny raised alarm at perceived secret power-sharing agreements between Nidaa Tunis and Ennahda for key ministries.¹⁰⁰ Left-leaning non-Islamists are openly critical of what they consider to be the Nidaa's regressive economic policy, which they see as designed to protect the interests of those close to the former regime. As MP Hosny said:

*Nidaa Tunis and Ennahda are basically the same in their economic program. Both support privatization. Both are engaged in a competition for dictatorship ... [In the upcoming elections] Nidaa Tunis will use money from the old regime to build a political machine and buy people off.*¹⁰¹

Recent statements by former Prime Minister Essebsi suggesting the possibility of allying with Ennahda in the next government only confirm to skeptical leftists and others that Nidaa's primary objective is power and would look to split the difference as soon as it becomes convenient.¹⁰² Similar allegations were made at the height of the heated dialogue talks in the fall of 2013 as both Essebsi and Ghannouchi met privately to discuss a settlement.¹⁰³ Both Nidaa's and Ennahda's critics allege that this rapprochement is the result of mutual agreement. Ennahda backed down on a political rights law that would have excluded members of Nidaa, including Essebsi, from political life, and in exchange, Nidaa would not go after Ennahda.¹⁰⁴

In order to remain ascendant, Nidaa must put forward a clear vision for Tunisia that can set it apart from its Islamist competitors. Without such a vision, Nidaa is in danger of remaining fractured, and therefore still unable to gain more seats in parliament than Ennahda, which, despite its downfalls, remains relatively popular with many Islamists.

Recommendations for U.S. policy

In Tunisia, the United States has a chance to shore up a democratic partner in North Africa. U.S. engagement is sought after in Tunisia, where the population aspires for new opportunities and progress beyond its traditional partners. But the United States has maintained a low profile on Tunisia following the September 2012 attack on the U.S. Embassy. In many ways, the embassy attack may have signaled the need for deeper engagement by the United States over the long term to help ensure that extremist elements are prevented from expanding their operations as they have elsewhere in the region. The compromise between Tunisia's political factions that paved the way for a caretaker cabinet presents an historic opportunity for the United States to reinvest in Tunisia, both diplomatically and economically. The United States is capable of taking a leadership role in showing its support for the last remaining democracy among the Arab Spring countries and working with European and regional partners to ensure that it remains so.

Enhance U.S. diplomatic engagement

Tunisian interlocutors from across the political spectrum express deep appreciation for former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and her level of engagement in Tunisia following the Jasmine Revolution. The relationship cooled in the wake of the attack on the U.S. Embassy compound in 2012. The deal on the constitution and the handover to a caretaker government created the conditions under which the United States can re-engage. The recent visit of Secretary Kerry and Deputy Secretary of State William Burns to Tunisia was a significant step in the right direction. The state visit of Prime Minister Mehdi Jomaa to Washington on April 4 offers an important opportunity to establish a strategic dialogue with Tunis. Such a dialogue will elevate the status of Tunisia in U.S. diplomacy—similar dialogues already exist with Morocco and Algeria—and should give the interim government a badly needed boost at home and abroad. The official visit also presents an opportunity for the United States to applaud Tunisians for bridging their divides on the constitution and to reinforce the U.S. commitment to pluralism

as a fundamental element of Tunisia's transition going forward. To maintain the momentum, work should commence on establishing a framework and benchmarks for the strategic dialogue to graduate to a strategic partnership.

On the ground, the United States should broaden and deepen the strategic dialogue. In Tunisia, U.S. diplomats are trusted interlocutors who are well regarded across most of the political spectrum. Historical European patrons are viewed with a jaundiced eye by Tunisian Islamists. Tunisians grumble about the influence of more powerful neighbors. The United States is generally viewed as neutral and can play a constructive role in nurturing relationships across competing political factions. As part of the dialogue, the United States should also seek to diversify its outreach to different elements of Tunisian society and build connections between businesses, nongovernmental organizations, and educational institutions. Tunisia is ripe for civil society outreach and the tools of economic statecraft.

Mobilize economic assistance from bilateral and multilateral donors

The United States should help mobilize bilateral and multilateral donors around a shared plan to shore up the Tunisian economy. Economic stagnation remains the single biggest challenge facing Tunisia at this stage of its transition. Much-needed relief to the tune of \$1.7 billion has begun to flow from the World Bank and IMF.¹⁰⁵ But this support must be complemented by additional economic assistance from the United States, France, and the Gulf states. Washington, however, must first lead by example. While the United States provided Tunisia with \$245 million in foreign aid in 2012, the program has eroded dramatically.¹⁰⁶ The fiscal year 2015 budget request stands at \$34 million, down from \$61.78 million in FY 2014.¹⁰⁷ At minimum, the United States should restore this assistance to FY 2012 levels and explore a larger economic assistance package contingent upon Tunisia continuing to hit transition benchmarks. The United States should also signal its intent to pursue a free trade agreement with Tunisia.

New U.S. assistance should be carefully coordinated with France, which remains Tunisia's largest trading partner. France has already disbursed €185 million in assistance.¹⁰⁸ French President Francois Hollande has pledged €500 million in aid and investment for 2013 and 2014, and proposed swapping €1 billion in Tunisian debt for development assistance.¹⁰⁹ The United States should encourage France to make good on these pledges, while supporting France's call for a free trade agreement between the European Union and Tunisia. At the same time, the

United States should reach out to Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and other nations in the Gulf region to provide additional financial support to Tunisia. The Gulf region has a stake in the success of Tunisia's transition and should be encouraged to mobilize its significant resources in the wake of Ennahda's departure from power. Support from all donors should be contingent on continued political progress toward an inclusive democratic system.

Bolster U.S. assistance to help combat extremist violence

The United States should review the level of assistance it provides to the Tunisian military and security services in their efforts to combat extremist violence. The Tunisian army is among the smallest in the Arab world and has little experience in the type of counterterrorism operations in which it is now engaged. U.S. support could come in the form of additional equipment, joint military exercises, and the development of the activities of the U.S.-Tunisian Joint Military Commission, including military training, the exchange of intelligence, and logistical support. Additional resources should also be provided to help strengthen Tunisia's ability to control and protect its borders with an eye toward the instability in neighboring Libya. The United States should examine what additional civilian resources can be brought to bear to help Tunisians address the root causes of the violent extremism in their country and to build popular support for inclusive and pluralistic politics. Finally, the United States should also work to build capacity in Tunisia's financial sector regulators to help reduce financing for terrorism within Tunisia and the region.

Increase donor support for security and justice sector reform

The United States should take further steps to professionalize Tunisia's security and justice sectors, as well as enhance democratic oversight. After decades of authoritarian rule, Tunisia's internal security services and justice sector have little experience with democratic governance and oversight. Tunisia's elected leaders need to assert control over these critical organs of the state. Ennahda attempted to exert influence via ill-advised bureaucratic personnel appointments. The appointments proved deeply controversial and politically destabilizing. These vital institutions should be insulated from the country's turbulent transitional politics, while being brought fully under the purview of the next round of elected leaders. To this end, the United States and its EU partners should engage the Tunisian government to develop and implement a comprehensive professional training effort for Tunisian Interior Ministry personnel. As part of this effort, the United States should increase its assistance beyond the \$24 million it has provided so far to professionalize the Interior Ministry.¹¹⁰

Conclusion

More than three years after Tunisia ignited a wave of popular uprisings across the Arab world, the country's transition to an inclusive democratic political system remains fragile. It is buffeted by insecurity in its neighborhood and homegrown sources of violent extremism. The economy has yet to turn the corner. Tunisia's geographic inequalities remain acute. Despite reaching a deal on a new and relatively progressive constitution, Tunisia's main political players remain deeply divided along Islamist and non-Islamist lines.

Tunisia is the only Arab state that has undergone political change and avoided major setbacks. Egypt suffered from the bad governance of the Muslim Brotherhood, which triggered a military coup and subsequent bloody crackdown. Syria continues to be trapped in a vicious civil war. Libya's transitional authorities have been unable to bring stability to the country. Yemen has enjoyed some progress on the political front, but regularly endures violence from extremist groups including Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. But despite severe challenges and distrust, Tunisia has avoided the problems other transition countries in the region have seen. In North Africa, Tunisia is almost alone in holding out real hope for the stability and progress that do not rely on the old models of authoritarian rule.

The United States should continue to deepen and diversify its ties with Tunisia—working to enhance government-to-government ties but also broadening the connections between our societies with businesses, nongovernmental organizations, and educational institutions. Recognizing the important relationships Tunisia has with partners in Europe, the United States should seek to leverage those ties to build a more cohesive transatlantic policy approach to help Tunisia manage the political, economic, and social changes it is experiencing and deal with the security threats that remain.

U.S. leadership and support will be crucial as Tunisia enters a more difficult period of internal politics. The fragile coalition of non-Islamists organized under the Nidaa Tunis banner appears likely to win the next elections. But it is far from clear that the coalition can hold itself together once it moves from campaigning to that of governing. For its part, Ennahda will take advantage of a likely opposition role to solidify its disaffected conservative base and fend off challenges from the Salafi community. As Tunisians continue to debate the future of their country, the United States should work with partners in Europe and the Middle East to help them move forward in their transition. Tunisia remains poised to serve as a model for countries in North Africa and the Middle East that are still trapped in the past debates about stability versus democracy. But the transition is still a work in progress and requires continued support and attention.

Appendix

Major events in Tunisia's transition

December 17, 2010: A 26-year-old Tunisian youth, Mohamed Bouazizi, sets himself on fire in front of the local municipal building in the interior town of Sidi Bouzid. Bouazizi's act of desperation was in response to the police beating him and stripping him of his produce cart, his main source of income. Riots and protests erupt shortly thereafter across Tunisia.

January 14, 2011: Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali flees Tunisia after 24 years of dictatorial rule.

February 27, 2011: Mohamed Ghannouchi, Ben Ali's last prime minister, resigns due to pressure and Baji Caed Essebsi is appointed as prime minister. Essebsi is a veteran politician and lawyer who was formerly active with Ben Ali's party but later distanced himself.

May 18, 2011: Two militants with alleged ties to Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghrib, or AQIM, and two security service members are killed in a gunfire exchange.

October 23, 2011: Tunisians elect a National Constituent Assembly whose primary mandate is to draft the country's constitution within one year. Islamist party Ennahda wins 41 percent of the seats and forms a governing coalition with two smaller secular parties.

Summer 2012: Vigilante violence by hardline Salafis intensifies across the country. In May, Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia holds a rally in the central town of Kairouan. Salafis attack alcohol vendors and clash with police. In June, the government imposes a curfew in several regions following Salafi riots against an art exhibition.

September 14, 2012: An Islamist mob led by Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia ransacks the U.S. Embassy compound and burn a neighboring American school. At least two of the protesters are killed in clashes with security forces.

February 6, 2013: Salafi extremists with ties to Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia assassinate secular politician Chokri Belaid.

February 19, 2013: Ennahda Prime Minister Hemadi Jebali resigns from his office after failing to form an apolitical technocratic government demanded by the opposition.

July 25, 2013: Salafi extremists with ties to Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia assassinate socialist politician Mohamed Brahmi.

July 29, 2013: Eight Tunisian soldiers are killed when their patrol is ambushed, and three of them have their throats slit in the Chaambi Mountain region.

August 27, 2013: The Tunisian government designates Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia a terrorist organization.

October 25, 2013: Ennahda Prime Minister Ali Larayedh pledges to step down in response to protest and pressure from secular forces.

October 30, 2013: A suicide bomber blows himself up on a beach in the coastal city of Sousse; no deaths or casualties reported.

January 9, 2014: Ennahda Prime Minister Ali Larayedh officially resigns.

January 26, 2014: The National Constituent Assembly votes to approve Tunisia's new constitution.

January 29, 2014: Mehdi Jomaa is sworn in as Tunisia's new prime minister and assembles a technocratic cabinet of independents.

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