

## The Ennahda Movement ... A Secular Party?

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**Abstract:** At its tenth national congress, the Ennahda Movement declared that they would separate “politics” from “preaching” and to transform itself into a national democratic party. This decision means ideologically that the movement is largely abandoning the identity politics and pan-Islamic agenda. Organizationally, it means giving up the traditional comprehensive organization style of Islamic movements and downgrading—or even cutting—its ties with the international organization of the Muslim Brotherhood.

This “rebranding” of the movement may have a positive impact on its political performance and on its acceptance locally and internationally. However, there are many challenges would be expected regarding the movement’s ability of recruitment and mobilization and its internal coherence and stability.

“ISLAMISM IS DEAD!”<sup>1</sup> “ENNAHDA OUT OF POLITICAL ISLAM,”<sup>2</sup> “From Political Islam to Muslim Democracy.”<sup>3</sup> With these breathtakingly dramatic headlines, various international news agencies covered the tenth national congress of the Ennahda Movement Party, which was held on May 20, 2016. At this congress, party leaders announced what has been described as an ideological shift or rebranding of the movement by deciding to separate the “political” from the “preaching” and to transform the Ennahda Movement into an ordinary “national democratic party.”<sup>4</sup>

This historic decision is considered by Rachid al-Ghannouchi—the founder, main ideologue, and current president of the Ennahda Movement Party—to be a sign of “maturity.”<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, it unleashed a harsh storm of criticism, with party leaders accused of betraying their history and beliefs and of making shameful concessions to satisfy Tunisian secularists and international powers.<sup>6</sup>

The aim of this piece is neither to praise nor to criticize this decision. Rather, it attempts to comprehend what it really means and what its possible impact on the political future of Ennahda Party will be. Yet, before proceeding, it is important to trace the roots of the political–preaching dilemma in the contemporary Islamic movement, which is the dilemma that Ennahda Party claims to have overcome at its last congress.

### ***Comprehensive Islam, Comprehensive Islamic Movements***

Some might argue that the problematic relationship between “politics” and “religion” or the dichotomy between the “political” and “preaching” in the context of Islamic movements can be explained by the political nature of Islam. It is commonly argued that Islam is “a political religion” because it was born as a political and religious

community, as simultaneously a sect and society.<sup>7</sup> However, the paper contends that the political–preaching dilemma is a modern phenomenon related to the emergence of the contemporary Islamic movement. The origins of this problematic relationship are pinpointed by Hassan al-Banna’s classic definition of Islamic comprehensiveness; a definition he elaborately laid out in one of his most famous quotes:

*"Islam is a comprehensive system, concerned with all aspects of life. It is country and homeland, government and ummah. It is ethics and power, mercy and justice. It is culture and law, knowledge and judiciary. It is matter and wealth, gain and prosperity. It is jihad and da'wa [the call to Islam], militia and idea. It is the true creed and correct worship, without distinction".<sup>8</sup>*

What is confusing in this definition is not only the obvious overstretching of the religious sphere and the sanctification of common social structures and practices, but also the means al-Banna invented to represent comprehensive Islam within a comprehensive movement.

In his booklet *Muslim Brotherhood under the banner of the Qur'an*, al-Banna wrote: "We are not a political party, although basing our politics on the foundations of Islam is at the heart of our idea. We are not a welfare association, although charitable work is one of our greatest purposes. We are not sport teams, although physical and spiritual sports are an important means to our ends. We are not any of these organizations"<sup>9</sup>. Instead, al-Banna defined the Muslim Brotherhood to be "a Salafi call, a Sunni order, a Sufi reality; a political institution, a sports team, a cultural association, an economic company, and a social concept."<sup>10</sup>

Clearly, al-Banna was greatly influenced by utopian political ideologies and their totalitarian models for social organization, which were very fashionable during the 1930s and

1940s. Therefore, despite the fact that al-Banna gave priority to social reform via religious preaching and charity activities, he also took two strategically significant steps during early 1940s. First, he decided that Muslim Brotherhood would be involved in party politics and participate in the parliamentary elections of 1941 and 1945. Second, he established an armed wing for the Muslim Brotherhood (called the Secret Apparatus) that was involved in violence, not only against the colonial powers and Zionists in Palestine, but also against its Egyptian political rivals.<sup>11</sup>

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Since then, there has been a problematic relationship between the "Political" or the "Partisan" and the "Preaching" aspects of Islamic movements, because each of these two aspects has its own characteristic way of organization, recruitment, membership, activities, discourse, and goals. Consequently, many drawbacks resulted from the hybrid nature of Islamic movements such as a lack of professionalism, disturbed discourses, vague strategies, etc. On the other hand, this comprehensive formula for Islamic movements is proved to be very efficient in terms of the recruitment of members and the mobilization of resources. These positive aspects of the hybrid nature of the Islamic movements masked to some extent its drawbacks and gave Islamic movements a false sense of achievement and self-satisfaction.

It seems that Ennahda Movement after its short experience in power, in the wake of the Arab Spring, realized the shortcomings of being a comprehensive movement, and decided to move toward more specialization; a decision that marks the end of a long path of evolution for the Tunisian Islamic movement.



### **The Ideological and Organizational Evolution of The Ennahda Movement Party**

In his keynote speech at the tenth congress, Rachid al-Ghannoshi summarized the evolution of the Ennahda Movement in three consecutive phases:

*“Ennahda has evolved since the 70s from an ideological movement engaged in the struggle for identity, to a comprehensive protest movement against an authoritarian regime, to a national democratic party devoted to reform.”<sup>12</sup>*

Organizationally, the Islamic Movement in Tunisia developed as al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya (the Islamic Group), which was founded in 1972. Then, it became Haraket al-Itijah al-Islami (the Movement of the Islamic Tendency) in 1981. Finally, in 1989, it became Haraket Ennahda (the Renaissance Movement).<sup>13</sup>

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Roughly, these three organizations represented three different forms of Islamic ideology. At first, the Islamic group was a purely religious movement, preaching Islamic principles in mosques, issuing a magazine entitled al-Maarifa (Knowledge) that addressed social and religious topics such as the family and education, and teaching the group's youth Islamic ethics.<sup>14</sup>

On June 6, 1981, the Islamic group became the Movement of the Islamic Tendency. The founding document of the new organization was characterized by the four typical features of political Islam movements:

- a.** It affirms the inseparability of religion and politics and declares its adoption of a comprehensive form of Islam and commitment to practice politics untainted by secularism and pragmatism, describing the call for separation between politics and religion as an intrusive Christian concept and the continuation of the ills of “modernity;”
- b.** It focuses on identity politics, making its first two missions the revival of the Tunisian Islamic personality and the renewal of Islamic thought;
- c.** It adopts a clear pan-Islamic ideology by assigning for itself the mission of “participation in the restoration of the political and civilizational entities of Islam at all levels: local, regional, Arabic, and international;”
- d.** It follows a mixture of religious and political means to achieve its goals, which include the restoration of the original role of the mosques “as centers for worship and popular mobilization,” launching an Islamized cultural and intellectual movement, resisting authoritarianism, developing and embodying the modern ideal for Islamic governance, developing and applying the principles of social Islam, and so on.<sup>15</sup>

In 1989, the Movement of the Islamic Tendency became the Ennahda Movement Party. This change was aimed at seizing the opportunity of political openness after Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's coup in 1987, which ousted the Tunisian president Habib Bourguiba. Initially, Ben Ali attempted to strengthen his legitimacy by promising a democratic transformation and establishing a pluralistic political system (a promise that he was not to keep). To assure the new regime and to be consistent with the Tunisian law of political parties, which bans religious parties, al-Ghannoshi and the other Islamist leaders decided to change their organization's name to “the En-



nahda Movement”, to remove “Islamic” from its title and to revise its ideology. Therefore, it was claimed that the Ennahda party was a point of departure for the Tunisian Islamic movement from the classical movements representing political Islam.<sup>16</sup>

In fact, the relationship between the Ennahda movement and the Muslim Brotherhood is a little bit problematic. No doubt, the founders of the Ennahda movement (Rachid al-Ghannoshi and Abdul-Fattah Mourou) were greatly influenced by the Brotherhood’s intellectuals (Hassan al-Banna and Sayid Qutb). However, they adopted an unorthodox version of Muslim Brotherhood ideology, mixing it with other intellectual sources including the traditional Tunisian reformist legacy, Shiite political Islam ideologues (al-Khomeini, al-Sadr, and Ali Shariati), and Western political ideologies.<sup>17</sup> Concerning the organizational ties between the movements, it has been established that the Ennahda Party was a part of the international entity of the Muslim Brotherhood, even if this entity was loose and not well-organized.<sup>18</sup>

These two moves in its historical evolution; from a purely religious group to a classical political Islam movement and then to an unorthodox Islamist party, have now been followed by a new move at this congress, in which it has become what might be called a post-Islamist movement, rejecting the hyperpoliticization and “ideologization” of Islam, and at the same time acknowledging the social functions of religion as a reference and a guidance for social life.

#### **New Structure ... New Ideology?**

The Ennahda Movement’s decision to separate the “Political” and the “Preaching” and its transformation into a national democratic party triggered a wave of arguments and counter-arguments. Some commentators supported this decision, considering it an important step toward more professionalism and political development. Others criticized it, claiming that it was dishonest pragmatism

and a shameful concession. Some argued that it was an historic decision and others believed that it was not that significant and it reflects the de facto status of the Movement, especially after the Arab Spring.

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Amid all these arguments and counter-arguments, it is hard to grasp the true meaning and significance of this decision. Nevertheless, it seems that the Ennahda Movement is attempting to rebrand itself via new structures and a new ideology.

Ideologically, it has decided to largely abandon identity politics for more practical policies-centered politics. Al-Ghannoshi, in his keynote speech, stated that “A modern state is not run through ideologies, big slogans and political wrangling, but rather through practical programs.”<sup>19</sup> Also, the movement decided to abandon the traditional pan-Islamic agenda characteristic of political Islam movements and adopt a strictly national one focusing on Tunisian causes.

Structurally, this decision means that the movement will become a traditional party and give up its religious function of preaching. “We are keen to keep religion far from political struggles, and we call for the complete neutrality of mosques away from political disputes and partisan instrumentalization”, al-Ghannoshi affirmed.<sup>20</sup> In addition, this means that the organizational ties between the Ennahda Movement Party and the international entity of the Muslim Brotherhood will be further weakened, if not cut altogether.



On the other hand, this decision has been exaggerated and has produced an overreaction. Obviously, these changes in the movement's structure and ideology neither represent an extreme nor a sudden and unexpected shift in the course of the Ennahda Movement's evolution. Also, it does not mean the secularization of the party structure or its ideology. Structurally, it is a mere "functional specialization," as al-Ghannoshi explicitly stated. As regarding ideology, al-Ghannoshi has attacked secular extremists in Tunisia, claiming for religion an important role "as a catalyst for development and promoting work, sacrifice, truthfulness, and integrity, and a positive force in our war against ISIS and extremists and supporting the state's efforts in development."<sup>21</sup>

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What is really relevant in this regard is what the impact of this decision will be on the Ennahda Party's political future? Some could argue that Ennahda will benefit more professional political performance and more local and international acceptance. However, there are many challenges to be expected as well. Abandoning identity politics and the organizational formula of traditional political Islam may have a negative impact on the movement's ability to recruit and mobilize and on its internal coherence and stability. Additionally, how will the Ennahda Party deal with the religious preaching activities? It is clear now that the movement itself will not be involved in these kind of activities, but what is the alternative? Will the movement establish (or at least support) another organization

set up to make the religious call or will it withdraw completely from this field? And if it will withdraw altogether, who will occupy this vacuum? Could more radical Islamist groups seize the opportunity and expand to fill this valuable space?<sup>22</sup>

Of course, the Ennahda Movement deserves credit for its continuous ideological and organizational dynamism and its ability to develop and adapt. However, it is too early to judge its latest decision or to evaluate its possible impacts on the whole spectrum of political Islamic movements in the region.

#### **Endnotes:**

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- 2) [http://www.ansamed.info/ansamed/en/news/sections/politics/2016/05/19/tunisia-gannouchi-ennhadha-out-of-political-islam\\_1186d693-0121-47bf-8211-886b50b9caf8.html](http://www.ansamed.info/ansamed/en/news/sections/politics/2016/05/19/tunisia-gannouchi-ennhadha-out-of-political-islam_1186d693-0121-47bf-8211-886b50b9caf8.html) (accessed: 6 Jun. 2016)
- 3) <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/tunisia/2016-06-08/political-islam-muslim-democracy> (accessed: 5 Jun. 2016)
- 4) <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/05/tunisia-ennahda-islamist-party-rebranding-congress.html> (accessed: 5 Jun. 2016)
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- 6) Azzam Tamimi, Article: Revisiting the separation between the political and the preaching, Arabi 21 (accessed: 5 Jun. 2016) <http://goo.gl/x3c03p>
- 7) Olivier Roy (trans. by Carol Volk), The Failure of Political Islam (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2001), 12.
- 8) Ana Belén Soage, "Hasan al-Banna And Sayyid Qutb: Continuity or Rupture?" The Muslim World, 99 (2009): 296.





- 9) Hassan al-Bannā, “Resālat al-ikhwān al-muslimoun tahat rāiat al-qur’ān ” in Majmu’at rasa’il al-shahid Hassan al-Bannā (Alexandria, dār al-da’wah lil-tebā’ah wa al-tawzī’ wa al-nashr, 1990), 121.
- 10) Nazih Ayub, Political Islam: Religion and Politics in the Arab World (London: Routledge, 1991), 100.
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- 12) <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/05/tunisia-ennahda-distances-political-islam-160520172957296.html> (accessed: 6 Jun. 2016)
- 13) Alaya Allani, “The Islamists in Tunisia between confrontation and participation: 1980–2008”, The Journal of North African Studies, 14:2 (2009): 258.
- 14) Ibid, 259 - 260
- 15) Rachid al-Ghannoshi, min tajrebat al-haraka al-islamiah fi tunis, (Maghreb centre for research & translation, London: 1999), 285 – 290.
- 16) Azmi Beshara, al-thawrq al-tunisiah al-majedah (Arab Center For Research & Policy Studies, Doha: 2012), 173 – 174.
- 17) Ibid, 173.
- 18) Basheer Nafi, Article: Tunisia’s Ennahda can change its discourse, but not the reality of political Islam”, Middle East Eye <http://www.middleeasteye.net/columns/tunisia-ennahda-can-change-its-discourse-not-reality-political-islam-1737542604> (accessed:6 Jun. 2016)
- 19) Official International Ennahda Page on Facebook (accessed: 5 Jun. 2016) <https://www.facebook.com/Nahdha.International/posts/700729823363612>
- 20) Ibid.
- 21) Ibid.
- 22) Basheer Nafi, Article: Tunisia’s Ennahda can change its discourse, but not the reality of political Islam”, Middle East Eye <http://www.middleeasteye.net/columns/tunisia-ennahda-can-change-its-discourse-not-reality-political-islam-1737542604> (accessed:6 Jun. 2016)

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