



# **ENNAHDHA'S SEPARATION OF THE RELIGIOUS AND THE POLITICAL**

A Historic Change or  
a Risky Maneuver?

**INTISSAR KHERIGI**



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## Executive Summary

The Ennahdha Party Tenth National Congress, attended by 1,185 party delegates from across Tunisia and overseas, was a keenly anticipated moment in Tunisia's political calendar. One particular issue has intrigued observers – the party's decision to relinquish the social and religious aspects of its work as a "movement" (*haraka*) and to become a purely political party (*hizb*). Its leader, Rached Ghannouchi, has dramatically announced that "there is no longer any justification for political Islam in Tunisia."<sup>1</sup> Is this move to shed the Islamist label and to define itself as a "party of Muslim Democrats" really a radical change? How did this step come about, and why is the party setting aside an element that has defined it for decades?

This analysis sets out the changes ushered in by Ennahdha's Tenth National Congress, examining how and why they happened and what they mean for the party's future development and for its position in Tunisia's political landscape. The Congress decisions, while certainly a bold move by Ennahdha, merely confirm changes that have gradually been taking place in Ennahdha's role, identity and priorities over recent years. The reality of Tu-

nisia's changing political context has placed new constraints on Ennahdha and opened up new opportunities. By taking the decision to leave behind its origins as a social movement concerned with religious and moral questions to become a national political party concerned with political and economic reform, Ennahdha's leadership is making a gamble that risks losing part of its support base. However, this also opens up the chance to become an inclusive, broad-based political party firmly occupying the Tunisian centre ground.

Beyond the Tunisian context, Ennahdha provides an interesting case study for understanding what factors and processes lead to change in the discourse, positions and strategies of Islamic-based parties. Ennahdha's move holds potential lessons for other Islamic parties on the viability of a "separation" between politics and religion, and how such a move can be achieved internally. It also puts forward a new concept of "Muslim Democrats" as a way of conceptualizing the relationship between governance and religion and addressing key questions of how Islam, democracy, pluralism and freedom can be accommodated in diverse societies.



## Background

The Ennahdha Party Congress took place in May 2016, attracting months of scrutiny, speculation and analysis. The Congress, which takes place every four years, is officially Ennahdha Party's highest authority, bringing together delegates elected by the party's local and regional membership to set its long-term vision and elect the highest decision-making body in the party, the Consultative Council (*majlis ash-shura*).

What was of particular interest at this Congress was Ennahdha's proposal to separate out the religious and political and to devote itself purely to political activities – what it calls “specialization” (*takhassus*). The congress motion proposed that Ennahdha “specialize in politics” by “ending its combination of being a party and comprehensive movement, to become a democratic political party with an Islamic reference, that is national in belonging, open to all Tunisian men and women, gives first priority to issues of social justice and national development, and is situated at the center of the political spectrum, responding to the needs of diverse sectors of society.”<sup>2</sup>

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This notion of “specialization” is subtly nuanced – note that the motion does not call for a separation between religion and politics

***The motion does not call for a separation between religion and politics but between the religious and political fields.***

but between the religious and political *fields*. This subtle difference indicates that the separation is not a cognitive but a functional one – the political field is autonomous from religion, but can be influenced by its principles. Religion still has a role to play in public and political life, but at the level of values that are interpreted and mediated by politicians, not clerics.

The motion *maintains religion as a “reference” or framework*: “the party draws on the foundations of religion, its objectives (*maqasid*) and higher principles to build its vision, political and social choices, and all the proposals and policies that it presents.”<sup>3</sup> Thus, while Ennahdha is no longer a movement that undertakes religious activities, it still strongly identifies with religion as a source of inspiration – a civil party inspired by religious values.

### No Longer an “Islamist” Party?

The party's president, Rached Ghannouchi, declared in a recent interview that specialization means that Ennahdha is “leaving political Islam and entering democratic Islam. We are Muslim democrats who no longer claim to represent political Islam.”<sup>4</sup> What does this turn of phrase mean?

“Leaving political Islam” appears to mean two things – first, *abandoning the ideal of a unified, comprehensive Islamic reformist movement* that engages in political, religious, educational, social and cultural activities. Many of the Islamic movements that emerged in the twentieth century were based on a vision of achieving a “civilizational revival” (*nahdha*) through promoting reform in a broad range of fields (education, sciences, law, the reform of religious institutions) and through a broad range of





means (preaching, social work, youth clubs, educational initiatives, politics, etc.). That ideal is still manifested in the structure of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, for instance, where the movement has long had a network of educational and charitable associations motivated by an Islamic reformist mission. Similarly, the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan operated as a charitable organization for many decades (partly due to the ban on political parties under Jordanian law until 1989) and ran various grassroots social programs.

Ennahdha's decision to rule out all activities outside the political realm signals a redefinition of its role and priorities. Ghannouchi's Congress opening speech, delivered to an audience of 10,000 including prominent national and foreign guests, contained many key messages about the future direction of the party, "A modern state is not run through ideologies, big slogans and political wrangling. It is guided by social and economic programs and solutions that provide security and prosperity for all."<sup>5</sup> This means reorienting the party's role away from that of morally reforming Tunisian society and towards developing policies that meet the daily material needs of Tunisians - in the words of one commentator, "abandoning the politics of identity and forcing a return to bread-and-butter issues."<sup>6</sup>

***“Leaving political Islam” means abandoning a “movement” approach and becoming a party open to membership by all Tunisians.***

Secondly, “leaving political Islam” means *abandoning a “movement” approach and becoming a party open to membership by all Tunisians*. Many at the Ennahdha Congress spoke of “professionalizing” the party, which appears to indicate a change from being an identity-based movement made up of a fixed social base closely tied together by a shared historical experience of repression under

the former regime to an open political party that includes Tunisians of all backgrounds, religious and non-religious. The congress decision to remove membership conditions relating to moral or religious criteria thus represents a strategic step towards opening the party up to new blood and attracting supporters beyond its regular support base.

**How Has This Change Occurred?**

Many analysts have argued that a large gap exists between the Ennahdha leadership, seen as being more liberal and pragmatic, and its social base, seen as being more conservative. However, the motion on the separation of its activities in the religious and political fields, which most commentators expected would provoke controversy among the grassroots, was passed with an overwhelming majority - 80.8% of votes.<sup>7</sup> This seems to be the outcome of two elements: strong messaging from the senior leadership, and a process of extensive communication with the party grassroots.

The congress documents show strong arguments from the Ennahdha leadership setting out the reasons behind the proposal for the separation of the political and religious fields in persuasive terms. They argue that specialization is necessary in order to keep Ennahdha relevant as a party, and to respect legal restrictions, which require civil society work to be independent and non-partisan. They also argue that specialization is the best choice for Ennahdha because it promotes “effectiveness and efficiency” by allowing people to “act in the domains most suited to their expertise and preferences”<sup>8</sup>, and that it also benefits religious institutions by granting them “the independence needed to develop and grow naturally, away from partisan tensions and changes in the political scene”<sup>9</sup> and benefits religion by allowing it to “play a role of unification rather than division”.<sup>10</sup>

This messaging was disseminated throughout the congress preparations, which involved an elaborate process of local, regional and sectorial



consultation to discuss the motions with members – 279 local, 24 regional and 8 sectoral party conferences were held with the participation of over 6000 delegates.<sup>11</sup> These events (shared on the party's social media pages) brought together local members with the national leadership to discuss the rationale for the motions in detail. This lengthy process of direct communication enabled the national leadership to transmit key messages to different party levels, facilitating the construction of a shared understanding of the concepts involved.

Members said that the motion on the separation of the religious and political fields was widely debated in local conferences. While many were concerned that the motion would mean a complete secularization of the party in the sense that religious values would no longer play any role, those who were involved in drafting the motion at the highest levels explained that specialization did not mean a rejection of the role of religious values in inspiring the party's platform at a substantive level, but rather a separation between political and religious activities at a practical level. This discursive process of decision-making thus helped to produce a consensus and build support for change.

### **Why is Ennahdha “Leaving Political Islam”?**

There is a vast political science literature that seeks to explain changes and “moderation” by Islamic-based parties.<sup>12</sup> Much of it uses the “inclusion-moderation hypothesis” – the theory that radical political parties, by entering the legal system, will have to agree “to abandon violence and any commitment to revolution, to accept existing basic social, economic, and political institutions ... and to work through elections and parliamentary procedures in order to achieve power and put through their policies”.<sup>13</sup>

The literature identifies a number of causal factors for explaining why Islamic-based parties change or “moderate” their positions, including:

- Opportunity structures - the need to change in order to achieve gains (such as party legalization)
- Path-dependence (previous commitments justify further changes)
- The influence of ideological rivals
- Theological influences
- Generational change
- Factional replacement / splintering and differentiation
- The role of the leader
- Structural pressures and restrictions: inducements and pressures (e.g. from elites, the regime, the media)
- The need to publicly justify positions

To understand which of these factors have played a role in Ennahdha's new announcements, we need to go further back in its history. The *Mouvement Tendance Islamique* (MTI), as Ennahdha was previously known, first emerged in the 1970s in response to the regime of Habib Bourguiba, who ruled Tunisia from independence in 1956 until he was deposed in a coup in 1987. The MTI emerged in opposition to what it saw as Bourguiba's top-down project to impose Western values and efface Tunisia's Arab-Muslim identity and heritage. Its opposition to the regime was initially centred on religious, social and cultural questions. However, the movement soon became increasingly engaged in broader questions of political reform – the last decade of Bourguiba's rule saw widespread social protests and political instability. The MTI was increasingly drawn into wider debates around political and economic reform, particularly through its student members who were coming of age at a time of political and intellectual fervor on university campuses. This opened up the movement to a set of issues far wider than religious and cultural questions – for example, the movement celebrated International Workers' Day for the first time in 1980, with Ghanouchi making a speech emphasizing Islam's guarantees of rewarding labor and the issue of the equitable division of property rights.<sup>14</sup>



### **The 1981 Manifesto: The First Move from the Religious to the Political**

In the midst of this changing political context, the movement issued a Founding Manifesto on June 6, 1981, declaring its establishment as a political party. This manifesto set out a political platform that included a commitment to democracy based on political pluralism and the sharing and alternation of political power via elections as the source of a government's legitimacy. It also provides a self-definition of the MTI as a political actor, rather than a religious movement – “the Islamic Tendency Movement does not present itself as an official spokesperson for Islam in Tunisia, and does not wish to one day have this title attributed to it. It believes in the right of all Tunisians to authentic and responsible engagement with religion, while it adopts a comprehensive view of Islam as the foundational creed on which all its intellectual visions are built.”<sup>15</sup>

*The 1981 Manifesto represents the movement's first official move away from the religious to the political and its repositioning as a political party. It contains some of the same elements seen in the motion passed at the party's 2016 congress, drawing on religion as a foundation for its vision but neither speaking for religion, nor as a religious actor. However, the movement continued to have a strong religious identity – alongside political meetings, religious circles and *tarbiyah* (religious education) played an important role in the party's vision, and membership criteria included moral and religious conditions. Many of its members continued to see it as a social movement with a responsibility to address and change the moral condition of society through educational, social and cultural activities that emphasized religious values.*

### **After the Revolution: From the Political Wilderness to Government**

After its unsuccessful application for recognition as a political party in 1987, and the pursuant crackdown on the movement by

the Ben Ali regime from 1989 onwards, Ennahdha operated as a clandestine movement inside Tunisia, and as a party-in-exile abroad. Its work was largely focused on protesting against the Ben Ali regime and developing links with other opposition movements and human rights NGOs to draw attention to human rights violations and repression in Tunisia.

Following the revolution, Ennahdha's external context radically changed. From being an opposition movement protesting against the system, it found itself at the centre of political governance, entering government for the first time after its election victory in October 2011. These dramatic changes in the Tunisian political landscape opened up new opportunities but also imposed new constraints on Ennahdha as a political actor.

### **Constraints: Focusing on its Political Role**

Since the revolution, Ennahdha has had to dedicate its resources to its political role as a member of the Higher Commission for the Achievement of the Aims of the Revolution (the Ben Achour Commission) between February and October 2011, while simultaneously rebuilding its institutional structures and running an election campaign for the first democratic elections in October 2011. Following its election victory, many of its top leadership took on ministerial or parliamentary positions, leaving gaps within the party structure as human resources were stretched.

In the aftermath of the revolution, Ennahdha's educational and cultural activities appear to have taken a backseat to its political functions. The party was increasingly constrained in its social activities on both a legal and a practical level. Under the new freedom of association law passed after the revolution, non-governmental organisations cannot have individuals on their board who also hold party political positions.<sup>16</sup> While many political activists had previously been leading



members of human rights NGOs and trade unions (for example, Moncef Marzouki, who became President after the October 2011 elections, had previously been a founding member of the Tunisian League of Human Rights), all activists were now forced to choose between politics and civil society work. Ennahdha's leaders, similarly, had to choose between their political and social roles.

Furthermore, going into government exposed Ennahdha's statements, activities and policies to greater scrutiny than ever before. When Hamadi Jebali, party secretary general and prime minister-to-be, made an analogy between the party's 2011 election victory and a sixth "rightly-guided caliph", a chorus of criticism from media and political elites forced him to clarify his statement. This religious reference, he explained, "simply aimed to derive inspiration from our values and the political and civilizational heritage of the Tunisian people...I firmly and solemnly reaffirm that our choice of political governance is the republican, democratic system which draws its legitimacy solely from the people."<sup>17</sup>

Thus, radical changes in Tunisia's political context have opened up new opportunities for Ennahdha to govern for the first time, but also imposed new constraints, obliging it to fine-tune its discourse to suit public opinion and clarify its ideas to a new audience beyond its own members. Becoming a governing party also exposed it to new concerns and challenges – managing the machinery of government, operating within a three-party coalition and navigating a complex economic, social and regional security climate.

These new constraints help explain the party's new concern with developing policies for economic, political and security reform. Faced with resource constraints when much of its senior leadership became engaged in managing a fragile democratic transition, it has increasingly prioritized its political work over its educational, social and cultural activities.

### **Solving the Question of Religion and State**

In its public discourse, Ennahdha frequently places great weight and emphasis on its contribution to Tunisia's new constitution. It sees the constitution, the most progressive in the Arab region, as Tunisia's biggest achievement since the revolution and a model for the region.<sup>18</sup> In particular, Ennahdha's discourse presents the constitution as a definitive response to the question of the relationship between the state and religion. The document sets out a compromise position – it states that Tunisia is "a civil state, founded on citizenship, the will of the people, and the primacy of law" (Article 2) while recognizing Islam as the religion of Tunisia and requiring the state to be "the protector of religion" and to consolidate "Arab-Muslim identity" (Articles 1, 6 and 39).

### ***Ennahdha's discourse presents the constitution as a definitive response to the question of the relationship between the state and religion.***

For Ennahdha, the constitution settles an existential conflict waged for over a century between secularist and Islamist visions of the role of religion in public life. It is in response to this conflict that Ennahdha first emerged to oppose Bourguiba's vision of *laïcité*, its mission being to defend religious freedoms and promote the role of religion in public life. Ennahdha's leaders take the view that the compromise achieved in the constitution ends this conflict (at least theoretically) by introducing a new mode of governance in which, on the one hand, the state respects and protects religious freedoms and supports religious institutions and, on the other, the state is "civil and republican" and religious spaces are firmly politically neutral.

As Ghannouchi stated in a recent interview, "Islam is now coexisting peacefully with the state. The state, as mentioned in our constitution, protects Islam. And Muslims and our



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free society protect Islam. So Islam does not need to be protected by one party...” This has implications for Ennahdha’s evolving role – he continues, “We would like to promote a new Ennahdha, to renew our movement and to put it into the political sphere, outside any involvement with religion. Before the revolution we were hiding in mosques, trade unions, charities, because real political activity was forbidden. But now we can be political actors openly. Why should we play politics in the mosque? We have to do politics openly in the party.”<sup>19</sup> Thus, the new compromise, which Ennahdha helped to forge, requires religion to be freed from the control of the state, but equally for politics to be free of the control of religion. With these developments, part of Ennahdha’s original mission as a social movement fighting for religious freedoms has come to an end.

### **Religiously Inspired – but not a Religious Party?**

The decisions and statements of the Ennahdha Congress demonstrate a clear desire on Ennahdha’s part to establish itself as a national party at the centre of political life, rather than a religious party *per se*. In fact, for some time, Ennahdha’s leadership, from its president and central committee to its members of parliament, have increasingly adopted non-religious discourse. A review of its press releases and official statements since 2011 show that hardly any are focused on religious or moral issues. In fact, Ennahdha seems to consciously refrain from commenting on religious issues, at least in its official statements.

An example is the proposal made by the Al Horra parliamentary bloc in March 2016 to introduce a ban on the *niqab* (face covering). While many expected Ennahdha to take the lead in opposing the ban, the party adopted a relatively restrained discourse that emphasized the constitutional right to freedom of religion, insisting that while the country’s security situation could require a restriction on dress, any restriction must respect the rights set out in the constitution. Rached Ghannouchi, who openly opposed the proposed ban, did so on the basis that wearing *niqab* or uncovering one’s head are both an individual right with which the state cannot interfere, and that such a move would represent interference in the private lives of individuals. Ennahdha has decidedly taken a back seat on debates involving moral or religious issues, and when it has engaged with these issues, uses arguments that are rights-based or constitutional rather than theological.<sup>20</sup>

Is this a decision based on principle or a tactical calculation? It is difficult to judge. What is evident is that Ennahdha’s national “brand” is closely tied to its identity as a party founded on religious values. Many Tunisians voted for Ennahdha in 2011 as a party that could be relied upon to promote religious values. Thus, possessing a religious brand that sets it apart from other parties on the political scene should presumably be an asset that it would seek to maintain. In taking this risky decision to move away from an established brand towards uncharted territory, in a context of political uncertainty, suggests the party is strongly committed to this change.

### **Change of Direction or Losing Direction?**

These changes raise an important question for the average Tunisian voter: what makes Ennahdha different as a political party? Ennahdha’s “unique selling point” has always been its religious values and its opposition to the Bourguibean *laïque* state model. What distinguishes Ennahdha, as a “party with an Islamic reference”, from all other parties in the Tunisian spectrum?



Ennahdha's move is a risky one – by adopting a decidedly non-religious discourse, it risks losing supporters as well as vacating ground that may be occupied by more conservative or even extremist parties. Ennahdha's clear signaling that it is not a religious party leaves an open space for the emergence of new parties who cater to voters seeking a party with a strongly religious agenda. By choosing to define itself more narrowly, Ennahdha risks narrowing its own supporter base. By forcing its leadership to choose between political and religious activities, it also risks losing some of its best-known public figures.

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Ennahdha appears to be wagering that while these changes may cause it to lose some supporters, it will help it to gain others. The congress motions push for “a strategic shift towards the wide conservative center”, a center that it estimates to represent “more than 70% of the Tunisian people”.<sup>21</sup> By repositioning itself as a center-right national party open to Tunisians of all backgrounds, religious and non-religious, it hopes to create a broader appeal and reach other segments of society who may previously have been put off by its image as a religious or social movement.

#### **A Party of “Muslim Democrats”?**

Through this move, Ennahdha is seeking to forge a new identity as a party of “Muslim Democrats”, a label its leaders have used increasingly often in recent years.<sup>22</sup> What this concept means remains fuzzy, although some elements emerge in Ennahdha's discourse. Central to this new identity is the concept of “reconciliation”, or the finding of a new balance between modernity and tradition, religion and nation, Islam and democra-

cy. This concept was mentioned no less than nine times in Ghannouchi's congress opening speech, which set out a vision of “reconciliation between the state and citizens, between the state and deprived regions, between opposing political elites, between the past and the present”.<sup>23</sup> It can also be seen in Ennahdha's discourse on Bourguiba and the post-independence state, which increasingly embraces and celebrates the achievements of the state (such as social welfare, women's rights, etc.) while continuing to be critical of certain aspects of it.

This reconciliation connects with another key element of Ennahdha's evolution as “Muslim Democrats”, which is *a new relationship with the nation-state*. One of the most animated moments of the Ennahdha Congress opening ceremony was a chant by the vice president of the party, Abdelfattah Mourou, echoed by the 12,000 attendees: “*The nation before the party*” (*al watan qabl al haraka*). This embrace of the concept of nation is a relatively new feature - Islamic movements have historically focused on the *ummah*, or the wider Islamic community, as the primary unit of belonging, tied together by ideals such as piety and virtue. Their relationship with the concept of the nation as a territorial community has been a complex and conflictual one. While some have rejected it entirely and denied the legitimacy of the post-Sykes Picot nation-state, some have reluctantly accepted it, while others have embraced it.

Ennahdha's own discourse has gone through an evolution that saw it move from being a pan-Islamist movement in the 70s and 80s influenced by the ideas of Middle Eastern political movements and somewhat ambivalent to the concept of the nation-state, to defining itself more and more as a specifically Tunisian party. This can be observed in the party's evolving image, its choice of music, dress, the omnipresence of the national anthem and flag at all events, and even its leaders' increasing use of the vernacular Tunisian dialect rather than classical Arabic. The con-



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gress motion which identifies Ennahdha as a “national party”, affirms this evolution in which Ennahdha has increasingly embraced the modern nation-state as a positive pillar of cohesion and social belonging.

With this approach comes another key element: a *new emphasis on inclusiveness*. The congress motions repeatedly refer to the need to “open up” Ennahdha – to new blood and new ideas. The congress motion to amend the party’s membership criteria shows a desire to reach a broader segment of Tunisian society, while the explanatory texts emphasize the need to reach out to “society’s intellectual, cultural, social, financial, and political elites within an open, inclusive national project”.<sup>24</sup>

**Ennahdha’s New Executive Committee**

The recent unveiling of the new Ennahdha Executive Committee gives a hint of how the party plans to put the congress’s decisions into practice. While many are familiar faces, an injection of new blood has brought in more women, up from two in the previous mandate to six. Among them are Sayida Ounissi, one of the youngest parliamentarians, as party spokesperson, Mehrezia Labidi, former deputy president of the parliament, responsible for relations with civil society, and Arwa ben Abbes, the first non-veiled woman to enter the Executive Committee, responsible for environment and urban planning.<sup>25</sup>

The most significant change is the appointment of former employment minister Zied Ladhari to the strategic position of Secretary General. Ladhari, 41 years old and an interna-

tional finance lawyer formerly residing in Paris, is a familiar face to many Tunisians as the party’s former spokesperson. His choice – given his relative youth, broad public appeal and known reformist tendencies – indicates that the leadership means business when it comes to internal reform in the coming mandate.

**A Model for the Region?**

The presence of over 1000 foreign guests at the Ennahdha Congress signals a strong interest by outside actors in what is taking place in Tunisia. Political parties and commentators from across the Arab and Muslim worlds were represented, from as far afield as Malaysia, India and Singapore. The congress also unleashed ripples of debate and discussion across the Arab region, including analyses by leading Islamist thinkers such as Fahmy Howeidy and Azzam Tamimi. While some embraced the announcements on the separation of the religious and political fields, others denounced it as an abandonment of Islamist principles, while still others viewed it as a sign of the failure of political Islam altogether.

The idea of a separation between the religious and the political is not a new one among Islamic movements in the Arab world. The Egyptian thinker Muhammed Imara and the Moroccan PJD politician and former foreign minister Saad Eddin Othmani, author of “Religion and State: Distinction Not Separation”, are among the many figures who have debated these questions. Jordan, Egypt, Sudan and Morocco all have some form of organizational separation between a religious movement on one hand, and a political party that has emerged from this movement on the other.

However, *Ennahdha’s model of separation appears to differ from existing models elsewhere in the Arab world*. While other parties such as Morocco’s Justice and Development Party, Jordan’s Islamic Action Front and Sudan’s National Islamic Front have also separated their political and religious activities, they maintain an organizational link between the party and the parent movement, which continues to car-



ry out religious, social and cultural activities. In Jordan, the party and movement overlap and appear to share a very similar leadership. In the Sudanese case, the party and movement continue to be linked within an umbrella governing body. In Morocco's case, the party and movement operate independently.

In Ennahdha's case, the congress motion adopted relinquishes non-political work altogether, leaving it to independent civil society organizations. It does not provide for a separate movement to continue social, cultural and religious activities. In this sense, Ennahdha's model is a new one in the Arab region. Its implementation and its impact on the party will be closely watched by others around the region.

### Conclusion

The changes adopted at Ennahdha's congress represent a major milestone in the party's forty-year history. However, its decisions do not signal a sudden departure from Ennahdha's overall trajectory. Rather, when viewed in light of the party's development over four decades, and in particular the last five years, they appear to be a confirmation of an ongoing evolution in accordance with the opportunities and constraints of the context within which the party operates. Through a process of external adaptation and internal revisions, Ennahdha Party has evolved from being an exclusively "Islamic project" chiefly aimed at restoring Arab-Muslim identity and the role of religion to being a national party concerned with domestic questions of political and economic governance and the construction of a new "national project".

It is the outlines of this new "national project" that remain to be drawn – a tough task facing Ennahdha as well as other Tunisian parties confronted with the crisis of a post-independence economic and political model that no longer meets the needs and challenges of today's Tunisia. The challenges facing Ennahdha are many – implementing the congress motions on modernizing and professionaliz-

ing the party and separating it from religious activities risk undermining its support base, weakening its identity, and potentially losing some of its leadership. However, they could also open up huge opportunities for Ennahdha, making it more open and appealing to broader segments of Tunisian society

All this, of course, depends on the direction of Tunisia's domestic and regional context over the coming years. As the largest party in parliament, Ennahdha faces a double challenge – the first being to push for national reforms to revive the Tunisian economy, create much-needed jobs, consolidate democracy, tackle corruption, complete the transitional justice process and achieve the demands of the revolution, while at the same time navigating a delicate regional security situation. The second challenge is to achieve internal reforms to transform it from a religious-based movement that sees politics as an instrument of moral and social reform into a political party that is able to achieve material improvements and a better quality of life for ordinary citizens.

### Endnotes

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## **ENNAHDHA'S SEPARATION OF THE RELIGIOUS AND THE POLITICAL:**

**A Historic Change or a Risky Maneuver?**

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The Ennahdha Party Tenth National Congress, attended by 1,185 party delegates from across Tunisia and overseas, was a keenly anticipated moment in Tunisia's political calendar. One particular issue has intrigued observers – the party's decision to relinquish the social and religious aspects of its work as a "movement" (haraka) and to become a purely political party (hizb). Its leader, Rached Ghannouchi, has dramatically announced that "there is no longer any justification for political Islam in Tunisia." Is this move to shed the Islamist label and to define itself as a "party of Muslim Democrats" really a radical change? How did this step come about, and why is the party setting aside an element that has defined it for decades?



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