The Tunisian Islamist Shift

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Contexts and Consequences

Basheer M. Nafi

ALSHARQ FORUM

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Introduction:

On May 20–22, 2016, the "Islamist" Nahda Party of Tunisia held its Tenth General Conference. This is the party's second conference since the triumph of the Tunisian revolution of December 2010 and the removal of Ben Ali's regime in January 2011. The previous conference was held in July 2012, eight months after the elections of October 2011 in which the Nahda Party emerged as the biggest party in the national assembly and came to lead the first elected coalition government of the post-Ben Ali era.[1]

In 2012, Nahda leaders recognized that both the country and the party had entered a new phase of their history, and that fundamental issues underlying Nahda's structure and vision would have to be reconsidered. But the nature of the post-revolution transitional period and the contingencies of the political situation in the country forced Nahda to postpone resolving these issues to a later conference. The Tenth Conference, therefore, was meant to be a major turning point in the turbulent history of Nahda.

Following a series of regional meetings and preparatory seminars in the run-up to the conference, Nahda issued a document outlining the main themes around which the conference would revolve. Among other things, the document spoke of three pillars for the party's new vision: 1- The nationalist values of the Tunisian republic, as stated in the (new, post-revolution) constitution; 2- An Islamic framework; and 3- The value of human achievement.[2]

Over the weeks leading up to the Tenth Conference, Nahda's leaders and senior cadres gave a preview of the political and ideological shifts expected to be adopted at the conference in a series of press interviews and comments. They pointed to the necessity of Nahda moving away from its legacy as a protest movement and preparing itself for a new role leading the state and formulating a "state-thought" model; of the specialization of Nahda as a civilian political party; of the Tunisian state and its preservation as one of the highest goals of the new Nahda; and of

severing all ties, real or imagined, that linked the Nahda with the "international" Muslim Brotherhood movement.[3]

Since it was founded by a group of Islamic intellectuals and activists in the early 1970s, and particularly since it publicly announced its existence in 1981, Nahda was always seen as a party of political Islam associated with the Muslim Brotherhood. From its inception, Nahda played a significant role in the opposition to Burgaiba's increasingly authoritarian and radically secular rule, and to the dictatorial regime of Ben Ali. An early voice for democracy within the mainstream Arab–Islamic political movement, Nahda was influential within the Muslim Brotherhood fold in the mid-1990s, advancing a democracy and multi-party system model, as well as affirming women's rights in society. Hence, predictions about fundamental changes in Nahda's outlook and its Islamist connections have attracted significant attention within both Islamist and non-Islamist circles in the Arab world and beyond.[4]

At the conclusion of the Tenth Conference, the Nahda party released its long-awaited conference manifesto. Although partially written in general and ambiguous language, the implications of the conference final statement were in agreement with earlier hints made by Nahda spokespersons. The statement declared that "This historic conference clearly affirms...that the Nahda party has practically overcome all causes that have made some see it as part of what is called 'political Islam', and that this common label does not bear out the reality of its present identity, and nor does it reflect the substance of the future project that it will carry out."[5]

In an expression of the tension surrounding Nahda's search for a new vision, the statement used several terms to describe its identity: as part of the Muslim democrats; a nationalist party, and as a democratic party with an Islamic referential framework. The statement, however, spoke in clear terms of Nahda's specialization as a political party that was no longer concerned with Islamic preaching, describing the religious as a sphere of its own which should be liberated from the political.

Although not yet definitive, Nahda's apparent new position may be summarized as follows: 1) Nahda does no longer see itself as an Islamic political party, but rather as a civilian and democratic one generally inspired by Islamic values; 2) Nahda is a Tunisian nationalist party that is connected neither with the Muslim Brotherhood nor any other supranational political umbrella; and 3) As such, Nahda will focus its efforts in the political sphere. The religious sphere, with which many other Islamist groups, including the Muslim Brotherhood, have been involved, should be the responsibility of specialist bodies, in particular the official Department of Islamic Affairs, and should be entirely free from political influences.

Nahda's new position and self-identification has engendered all kinds of reactions. While some Tunisian and Arab circles have welcomed the new shift in Nahda's outlook, others have questioned its sincerity and described its new position as merely tactical. The former transitional president of the Tunisian republic, Dr al-Muncef al-Marzuqi, himself a well-known opponent of despotism and authoritarianism in Tunisia and the Arab world, published commentary op-ed piece in which he expressed the view of perhaps many Arab and non–Arab observers. Recalling the demise of the Arab nationalist movement over the past few years, al-Marzouqi wrote

that the decline of political Islam was also imminent.[6]

What exactly is this 'political Islam', and how is it changing as a movement? Are historical Islamic forces such as the Muslim Brotherhood reaching the end of the road? And does Nahda's shift in outlook reflect a sort of intellectual and political maturity or a more profound and broader crisis of politics in Tunisia and the Arab world at large?

The Emergence of Political Islam:
Political Islam is by definition concerned with the political expression of Islam, a meta-narrative of the grand narrative of Islam. While literatures on the modern Muslim world have used different terms to describe Islamic movements, such as revivalist, militant, radical and fundamentalist, the common denominator of these movements is their political outlook, their seeking of power in its modern, political sense. As its birth is marked by the founding of Jama'at al-Ikhwan al-Muslimin (the Muslim Brotherhood) of Egypt in the late 1920s, political Islam is a modern development, representing neither a strict continuity of Islamic traditions nor a return to its traditions. Its vision largely revolves around the re-presentation of traditions both Arab and Islamic through the light of the modern.

Several common factors, experienced in most Muslim countries, contributed to the emergence of the Islamic political trend and the political movements that embodied its discourse and upheld its broad and continuously-evolving agenda.

First came the adoption of wide-ranging modernization programs by Muslim statesmen and colonial administrations from the mid-19th century onwards. These modernization projects were not about the devolution of power; in contrast, they were about the concentration of power. Land, education, administrative structures, the economy, the religious endowment sector, legislation, communications, the police service and the judiciary—all came under the direct control of the state. In traditional Muslim society, power was neither centralized nor concentrated. In the modern state, however, the situation fundamentally changed.

It is common among social scientists and historians today to speak of modernity as a shared worldwide experience, largely contributed by western European nations, and only to a much lesser extent by the rest of the world. This should not obscure the fact that modernization in the Muslim world was, in many respects, a disruptive and violent process. Popular uprisings in the Ottoman sultanate, Qajari Iran, and British India during the nineteenth century, were not the making of Muslim fanatics, but rather expressions of alienation, pain and anger at the loss of livelihood and social stability.

From the viewpoint of a large segment of educated Muslims at the time, and from the perspective of large numbers of ordinary people, the modern state was seen as deviating from Islamic tradition, and as tyrannical, unjust and unfair. Early responses to the modern state arose in Istanbul from members of the state machinery itself, the faithful sons of the Ottoman sultanate. A group of civil servants and intellectuals, known by historians of the late Ottoman period as the Young Ottomans, would advance the sharpest critique of the modern state and its rulers.

In their opposition to the modern state, the Young Ottomans spoke in terms of 'adalat (justice), ijma' (consensus), and mashurat (consultation), invoking the norms of the traditional state-society relationship. Some of

the writings of the Young Ottomans stressed the view that the Ottoman salvation lay in the return to shari'a. The Young Ottomans even seemed to equate the shari'a with natural law, as conceived of in the enlightenment discourse of the eighteenth-century French philosophers.[7]

This is a very significant development in the intellectual legacy of Islam. For the first time in Islamic history, shari'a was now being externalized, objectified, and seen as a corpus of laws, regulations and rules. This novel imagining of the shari'a had never been known in Islamic societies before. Traditionally, the shari'a had something to do with the way people spoke, with their manners, the way people related to each other, as well as with issues relating to contracts, marriage, crime and punishment. Thus, the organic nature of society's connections to the shari'a were forgotten or overlooked in this new interpretation. In its place, a shari'a as a separate legal statute in the modern sense was to be constructed, invoked, called upon and implemented, even enforced, not by the 'ulama or society, but by the state. This notion would become one of the fundamentals of the Islamic political discourse of the 20th century.

Second is the gradual demise of the 'ulama class. With the introduction of modern institutions and bureaucracy, the pervasive role of the 'ulama was to gradually recede and diminish. In its place, more influential classes and social groups were to come into existence. Yet, within these new classes—teachers, lawyers, journalists, army officers, bureaucrats, and agents of foreign companies and so on—a fundamental disagreement about the frame of reference for the state and society began to emerge.[8]

There existed people who believed that the western model was the only choice available for their societies to acquire the necessary power for revival and progress. On the other hand, there were people who believed that only the return to Islamic traditions, and to an imagined glorious period of Islamic history, could safeguard Muslim lands and peoples. These differences of opinion among these new classes about the direction of state and society represented a major impetus behind the emergence of political Islam. The vast majority of the rank and file of modern Islamist parties and organizations are actually graduates of modern educational institutions: medical doctors, engineers, computer scientists, and so forth.

Third is the maximization of the power of the state in modern Muslim societies. Unprecedented increases in the power of the state led to important changes, for if one is not in agreement with the existing education system and wants to see it changed or else if one does not like the way the economy is being run and seeks to bring about a particular shift in the economic order, one cannot achieve these goals without getting hold of the instruments of the state. That is why political Islam is political, and why political Islam is about competing for the ultimate power, the power of the state.

Fourth is the pervasive feeling that Islam is under threat. With the continuous loss of Muslim-governed lands to expanding imperialist powers in the nineteenth century, the deep western economic penetration of Muslim societies, and the encroachment of western missionaries and education, Muslims believed that not only were their livelihoods under threat, but also their faith. Calls for Islamic revival and regeneration were one answer to these perceived threats arising from imperialist domination and the inability of existing Muslim ruling classes to protect their land and people. In the 20th century, revival and regeneration became cornerstones of the Islamic political vision.

More crucial in understanding the diversity of political Islamic forces, however, are the specific conditions that led to the emergence of every single Islamic political party.

For example, the birth of the Muslim Brotherhood was closely associated with a heated debate in the Egypt of the 1920s about the constitution, king and parliament, and the country's path to political independence, as well as about the identity of Egypt and the role of Islam in the public sphere. There is a wide-spread belief that the Muslim Brotherhood, like the Communist movement, had a blue-print for expanding organizationally from Egypt to other Arab countries. This was not entirely true. In most cases, existing local Islamic associations and societies founded in response to local conditions chose later to join the Muslim Brotherhood.

In Turkey, the first party with a distinctive Turkish-Islamic outlook was launched in 1970 by Necmeddin Erbakan. A son of the Turkish republic and its secularization project, Erbakan's Islamic background was partly shaped by Naqshbandi Sufism. In the Indian subcontinent, the emergence of Jama'at-i Islami cannot be separated from the rise of Hindu nationalism and deepening Indian Muslims' fear of being overwhelmed by the Hindu majority. More recently, the Islamist Islah Party of Yemen was established in 1990 by a coalition of Sunni professionals influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood and Zaydi tribal leaders. Like the Islamists in Jordan, the Islah was seen from the very beginning as an integral part of the Yemeni political arena. In Morocco, the Justice and Development Party, which came into existence in 1996, was the outcome of an agreement between a group of liberal Islamic activists and an elderly, conservative nationalist leader strongly loyal to the royal family.

In terms of the making of each of these major Islamic organizations, political Islam is not a monolithic phenomenon.[9] The agendas and goals of these Islamic organizations were informed by the specific experience of each of the modern Muslim nation-states in which they existed. Equally important, the Islamic political phenomenon as a whole is not consistent either. It is not a project that has been accomplished or perfected. An analysis of the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1940s and the 1950s is definitely not applicable to the same organization in the 1990s: it has changed not only in terms of minor features, but also in regard to its structural fundamentals and characteristic political discourse.

In the 1920s and early 1930s, the Muslim Brotherhood were not necessarily very political; their involvement in the political sphere began to grow from the late 1930s onward. The Muslim Brotherhood's view of, and relationship with, the state during the leadership of Hassan al-Banna was not the same as in the 1960s, a period that witnessed the height of the confrontation between political Islam and the largely military–nationalist regime of Gamal 'Abd al-Nasser. From the early 1990s, the Muslim Brotherhood declared their commitment to democracy, to peaceful political opposition, and to the multi-party system of government. These themes, whether or not they were manifest in the 1950s and 1960s, had never before occupied a prominent position in the Muslim Brotherhood's program.

In post-independence Pakistan, Jama'at-i Islami gradually spread from its elitist roots into a mass movement. Rather than calling for the total transformation of state and society, Jama'at-i Islami has expressed its commitment to democratic change, the existing constitution, and the multi-party system. Early in the first decade of the 21st

century, a group of young activists in the Turkey's Islamically-rooted Welfare Party broke ranks and launched the Justice and Development Party (AK Party), led by Recep Tayyip Erdogan. The AK Party declared itself secular, conservative, and democratic. In government since 2002, the AK Party has transformed Turkey's politics and economy without undermining the secular foundations of the Turkish republic.

That is why political Islam should be seen as a continuously evolving phenomenon. It is not clear yet where each of the Islamic political organizations is going to end. What should be certain is that the way the Egyptian Islamic political trend is moving will not necessarily be the same as its counterpart in Pakistan or Indonesia.

The Future of Political Islam:

In 1994, against the background of a bloody internal conflict breaking out in Afghanistan following Soviet occupation and the degeneration of the Algerian transition towards democracy into civil war, Olivier Roy, the eminent French political scientist, published a book entitled "The Failure of Political Islam".[10] Islamist groups played a significant role in the events that engulfed Afghanistan and Algeria in the early 1990s, and both the failure of post-Soviet Afghanistan and Algeria's short-lived democracy were regarded as failings of the Islamists.

Although it had existed, in one form or another, since the 1920s, it was not until the 1970s that the Islamic political trend became a force to be reckoned with in Muslim-majority societies. The 1970s witnessed the triumph of the Iranian Islamic revolution, the Afghan mujahidin spearheading the resistance to the Soviet occupation, and the beginning of the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood as a mass movement in Egypt. The sometimes-violent backlash to political Islamic movements

in the 1980s and 1990s, combined with the Islamists' inability to grasp the nature of the modern state, created confusion about the Islamist phenomenon and its trajectory.

This crisis of political Islam was not only apparent in Afghanistan and Algeria. Armed Islamic opponents to Hafiz al-Assad's regime in Syria, and Mubarak's regime in Egypt, were crushed with merciless force. In Iran, threats emanating from the war with Iraq and internal opposition to the Islamist regime paved the way for the authoritarian core of Iran's Shi'ite political theory to prevail over revolutionary hopes of a free and just system of government. Even in Turkey, the democratically-elected coalition government led by Erbakan, was removed from power by the army in what has since been described as a "post-modern coup". Forces of "Islamic revivalism", described in the 1970s as the most important development to emerge in Muslim societies, were beginning to seem like a merely transient phenomenon.

The truth, however, is that there existed no 'ideal type' against which to measure the possible courses of the political Islam.

By the early years of the new century, Islamists were making an unmistakable comeback. In Turkey, the threats posed by the corrupt and inefficient traditional ruling elites to the livelihood of the middle class and the integrity of the country, propelled the newly-founded AK Party, with its soft secular–Islamic outlook, to power. In most Arab countries, where wild ruling elites tried to compensate for the lack of legitimacy underlying their regimes by monopolizing both political authority and national wealth and by turning the state into an immense instrument of oppression, the political power of the middle classes largely disintegrated. Neither nationalist, Arab nationalist, or liberal political parties were able to provide

credible opposition to the unprecedented alliance, or even total identification, between the state as an institution and the ruling elites. Only the Islamists, now embracing all social strata, had a claim to speak on behalf of the people.

The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood made big achievements in the parliamentary elections of 2005, despite violent manipulation of the electoral process by Mubarak's security apparatus. The next year, in 2006, Hamas won an undisputed majority in the Palestinian elections in the West Bank and Gaza. In almost every Arab country where relatively fair elections have been held, the Islamists have made significant gains. Yet, confusion about mainstream expressions of political Islam, and what they mean for Muslims' search for freedom and justice in the modern world, has persisted. The outbreak of the Arab revolutions in 2011, then, represented a turning point in defining the position of political Islam within Muslim societies.

There is no doubt that the Islamists were, in political terms, the main beneficiaries of the Arab spring.[11] This was not because the Islamists were the sole authors of the revolutions. In reality, they were neither the making of a specific social group nor the outcome of any party's planning. They were mass movements in every sense of the word, reflecting deepening feelings among large majorities of the people that the state had failed and that corrupt and incapable ruling elites had to be got rid of. As Islamists began emerging as the only viable force to counter the state by shaking the authoritarian grip of the state and its rulers, the Arab spring paved the way for the free rise of Islamic political parties.

The Counter-Revolutionary Wave and Its Ramifications:

Affirming the shared political experience and close ties between the Arab peoples, winds of revolution swept through a number of Arab countries in the few months between December 2010 and the spring of 2011. These developments resulted in regime change in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen. In Morocco, a wise king met his people halfway, implementing some crucial constitutional changes and inaugurating an era of free and fair elections. Within two years, however, the achievements of the Arab revolutionary movements seemed to have been completely reversed.

One reason behind the success of the counter-revolutionary wave was the Arab nature of the revolutions. Since the movement for change was a pan-Arab phenomenon, it was confronted on a pan-Arab level.[12] States that were not yet touched by the winds of revolution in 2011, especially Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, mobilized their influence and resources to defeat forces of change throughout the Arab region. On the other hand, within each of the countries that witnessed a regime change, the business of the revolutionary movement was left unfinished. In most cases, the Arab revolutions neither entirely unseated the traditional ruling elites, nor managed to fundamentally reform the state. Eventually, an alliance was formed between a few influential and reactionary Arab regimes on the one hand, and the traditional ruling classes and the old state in the revolutionary countries, on the other.

This alliance led to the counter-revolutionary coup in Egypt in July 2013; the containment of the movement for democratic change in Yemen; the political fragmentation and breakout of internal conflict in Libya; and the fall of the Islamist-led coalition government

in Tunisia. In Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, it was Iran that came to play the counter-revolutionary role. Rooted in its sectarian approach to neighbouring countries, Iran adopted a policy of maximum support to its allies in Baghdad and Damascus, as well as the Houthis of Yemen. The result was the sinking of these three countries into bloody civil wars, and the turning of the Syrian, Iraqi, and Yemeni struggle against minority-rule and despotism into crises with international dimensions.

In many respects, because the Arab revolutions marked the ascendance of Islamic political forces, the counter-revolutionary wave virtually became a war against the Islamists. The massacre of the supporters of the deposed, democratically-elected president Morsi at Cairo's Rabi'a square in August 2013, was celebrated by a number of Arab regimes and anti-Islamist Arab circles. A witch hunt against Islamists was launched in some Arab countries, with the Saudi and Emirati governments issuing lists of terrorist organizations in which democratic, mainstream Islamic organizations and ISIS were lumped together. Pressure was even exercised on western governments to declare the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization.[13]

There were limits, however, for what the counter-revolutionary drive could achieve. In terms of terminating the process of transition towards democracy and restoring the status quo ante, this counter revolution succeeded only in a few countries. In others, the democratic process is either proceeding without encountering insurmountable hurdles, as in Morocco, or in an atmosphere with an uncertain balance of power, as in Tunisia. Attempts to bring down the AK Party government in Turkey, whether by mobilizing opposition groups in street protests, through the electoral process, or by a military coup,

have failed completely. In the complex situation inside Yemen, where the Saudis and the Emiratis have taken the side of the legitimate government, Islamists have played a major role in the ongoing war against the pro-Iranian Houthis. More significantly, in Egypt, Yemen, Syria and Iraq, has been the failure of the counter-revolution to present a successful and convincing alternative, a political order responsive to the people's hopes and demands.

Yet, the impact of the drastic reversal of political fortunes in Egypt, the biggest of the Arab countries, was felt throughout the entire mashriq. The counter revolution not only caused a violent rupture in the democratic process, but also dealt a heavy blow to the largest and most influential of all Islamist groups: the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt. It was in Egypt, therefore, that the crisis of the Arab movement for change has become most apparent, and the position of the Islamic political trend has been most seriously affected. This could not go unnoticed by Islamists in other Arab and Muslim countries, including Tunisia, the cradle of the Arab revolutions.

The Tunisian Conundrum:
From the summer of 2013 onwards, the Tunisian Nahda Party came under constant pressure, both from small, anti-Islamic, secular parties, and from the more weighty circles belonging to the old regime and ruling elites. Conscious of their country's lack of weight in the balance of power in the Arab world, leaders of Nahda viewed the fall of Morsi in Egypt with a great sense of alarm. Amid an atmosphere of deepening divisions in the country and frequent political protests engineered by its opponents, the Nahda agreed to relinquish its democratic right to govern. A new government, dominated by technocrats, took over in January 2014. With the promulgation of a new constitution,

parliamentary and presidential elections were held at the end of 2014.

Nida' Tunis, the new party founded by the veteran politician al-Qayid al-Sibsi, and made of a coalition of elements of Ben 'Ali's dissolved former ruling party, hardline secular leftists and liberals, emerged as the biggest party in parliament. Nahda came far second. At a a time of economic hardship and rising unemployment, Nida' Tunis was perceived by many across the country as a safe pair of hands, able to reconnect with the wealthy, but anti-Islamist, Gulf states of Saudi Arabia and UAE, as well as with Europe. In the presidential contest, Nahda adhered to its policy of restraint and did not fight the elections. Al-Sibsi won the presidential seat comfortably.

Although the government led by Nida' Tunis has failed in its effort to improve the economic situation, and the party itself soon broke up, Nahda reached the conclusion that it had to rethink both its Islamic political position and its approach to the domestic political scene. On the practical, political level, encouraged by the departure of the hardline secular bloc from Nida' Tunis, Nahda decided to ally itself with president al-Sibsi and his party. But in a country with a vociferous secular political class and a highly polarized intellectual scene, Nahda has been continuously bombarded with questions about its ultra-nationalist ties and its belief in, and loyalty to, the Tunisian state. Hoping to put an end to what it has seen as a harmful debate, the Tenth General Conference was an occasion for Nahda to reposition itself as a non-Islamist, nationalist political party.[14]

Nahda's other decision, to confine itself to the political realm and leave the Islamic cultural and religious sphere (what is usually described in Islamic circles as the duty of da'wa) to other specialized institutions,

will perhaps have little practical impact. Originally, when the Nahda party was legalized by the post-revolution government in 2011, it embodied the entire organization of the Nahda movement. While some Nahda members believed that the movement should have long ago been split into two different organizations, one political and the other religious, the implications of the 2011 decision were obvious, and the Nahda movement by necessity morphed into an exclusively political platform. The Tenth Conference only confirmed this decision. This does not mean that the religious sphere should be left to the sole responsibility of the official 'ulama and the discredited Religious Affairs Department of the Tunisian state. Unless more credible, non-official bodies emerge to shoulder such responsibilities, the religious sphere will be left open to radical and extremist religious and quasi-religious elements.

Ultimately, however, the debate about whether Nahda is "Islamist", or a civilian nationalist party with an Islamic frame of reference, was essentially an elitist phenomenon, reflecting the preoccupations of the political class. The priorities of the great majority of Tunisians belong to a different category altogether. So far, Nahda's policy of restraint and accommodation has been, at least, relatively successful. Although firmly in government and the presidential palace, Nida' Tunis has not shown the authoritarian tendencies associated with Ben 'Ali's regime. Largely rational in his approach to the country's entrenched problems and demonstrating respect for the multi-party system, al-Sibsi has recently called for the replacement of the present, Nida' Tunis-dominated government with a national coalition.

Yet, whether the theoretical-political shift of Nahda will finally succeed in putting doubts about its identity and loyalty to rest, remains

to be seen. As in almost all other Muslim countries, the divisions within the political and intellectual classes of Tunisia are as old and deep as the nineteenth-century process of modernization. On the wider, Islamic–political level, the impact of Nahda's shift will be mixed. Few other Islamic political parties in the Arabic-speaking world seem to feel specifically burdened by their Islamist identity. However, the debate about the separation of the political from the religious has just started.

By Way of Conclusion:

Rarely did students of modern Islam, or political leaders in either the Muslim or the western world, differentiate between the mainstream of the Islamic political tendency, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, and the extreme Islamic fringes, such as al-Qaʿida. Marginal groups within modern political movements turning to violence, extremism, and even global terrorist methods is not a novel phenomenon. Socialist, Marxist, anarchist and nationalist movements all had, and some continue to have, their share of extremism and violence. Yet, the manner in which the marginal expresses itself should never be allowed to invalidate the legitimacy of the mainstream. In the medium term, violent and extremist Islamic political organizations will be defeated. Lacking any substantive popular following, they are already isolated and shunned by great majorities within Muslim societies. The mainstream, largely democratic, Islamic political movement is another story.

Whether we like it or not, political Islam, perhaps like nationalism, is a historical development. It is the outcome of the transformational currents of the modern times, not the plotting of ingenious Muslim activists equivalent to the Geneva-based group of Russians who brought about the communist revolution. Political Islam is more

or less a universal phenomenon, touching life and influencing politics in almost all Muslim countries. Although its agenda is largely specific to each country, it is not an isolated phenomenon that can be eradicated by oppressive security policies, nor corrected by propaganda campaigns.

As a modern development, political Islam should be seen as an attempt by the Muslim collective consciousness to cope with modernity. Like the idea of modernity itself, therefore, political Islam is continuously evolving. Engaging with it, on national and international levels, will certainly contribute positively to the outcome of this process.

A large number of Muslim countries are either in, or approaching what Antonio Gramsci called "a crisis of authority". With their mass following, Islamic political forces have played, and will perhaps continue to play, a considerable role in re-establishing order and bringing about stability. This is not to ignore the divisions and lack of consensus that Muslim societies suffer from. Nevertheless, as forces of the Islamic political trend have expressed a strong commitment to political pluralism, they may be able to significantly contribute to the reinvention of the consensus and the consolidation of democratic politics and the rule of law in Muslim countries.

The Tunisian Islamists' shift will be discussed by other Islamists for weeks and months to come. But one lesson from Tunisia should never go unnoticed: the political, Islamic or otherwise, should not be allowed to maintain a titular relationship with the religious. It is high time for Islamic political organizations to separate what is political from what is daʿwa. This separation is crucial for the moral wellbeing both of Islamists and of the society at large.

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