

# Prospects for Democratization in the Middle East Post-Arab Spring

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## INTRODUCTION

The immediate aftermath of the Arab Spring witnessed the ushering in of a new set of dynamics with the promise of more freedom, economic prosperity, dignity, and democracy. Some early analyses portray the Arab Spring as a critical and significant challenge to the status quo, even for countries in which old regimes were not toppled nor critically threatened. These views draw from a previously held assumption of the Arab world's "democratic deficit"; that is, an understanding that the region was unable to undertake political transformations akin to the successive waves of democratization seen in South America, Eastern Europe, and in some sub-Saharan African states. Indeed, the so-called "Arab exceptionalism," in relation to what Samuel Huntington has defined as the "third wave of democratization,"<sup>1</sup> is reinforced by an historical absence of genuine democratic governance in any of the Arab countries since independence.<sup>2</sup> The endurance of Arab authoritarianism in the face of various global democratization waves has been explained by citing the minimal reforms undertaken by ruling autocrats to stifle and circumvent democratic movements. Heydemann describes this pre-emptive phenomenon:

Authoritarian upgrading consists, in other words, not in shutting down and closing off Arab societies from globalization and other forces of political, economic, and social change. Nor is it based simply on the willingness of Arab governments to repress their opponents. Instead, authoritarian upgrading

involves reconfiguring authoritarian governance to accommodate and manage changing political, economic, and social conditions. It originated in no small part as a defensive response to challenges confronting Arab autocrats during the past two decades.<sup>3</sup>

Despite these tactful “authoritarian upgrading[s],” there is no doubt that “the Arab Spring [has been] a popular quest for freedom in all of its manifestations.”<sup>4</sup> This quest for freedom is also an indication of a crisis of legitimacy of the dominant political systems in place since national independence, established mostly by military officers and their families and labeled by some analysts as a form of “neo-Mamluk rule.”<sup>5</sup> The entrenchment of neo-Mamluk rule still represents the biggest challenge for post-revolution consolidation and political reform across the region.

Against this background, this chapter reflects on some key interconnected issues pertaining to democratic transition in the Arab world. In particular, it focuses on an exploration of the root causes of the Arab Spring and the differing trajectories the Arab states affected have taken. The chapter then undertakes an analysis of the Tunisian experience; its path from revolutionary fervor to political transition, and an assessment of the challenges for post-revolution consolidation.

## THE ERUPTION OF THE ARAB SPRING: AN EXPLORATION OF THE ROOT CAUSES

Because of its sudden nature and significant implications for the region and beyond, the Arab Spring has been the focus of, and will continue to attract, a great deal of political and scholarly attention.<sup>6</sup> The fact that the Arab region was governed autocratically in the immediate post-decolonization period is not a major surprise, but the persistence of this undemocratic form of governance, despite democratization waves elsewhere, is rather exceptional.

Following the overthrow of Tunisia’s autocratic ruler Zine El Abidine Ben Ali on January 14, 2011, uprisings swept quickly through neighboring countries including Egypt, Yemen, Syria, Bahrain, and Libya. The rapid transmission occurred not only geographically but also across social strata. The social, economic, and political crises, which kindled the Arab Spring,<sup>7</sup> included most notably high rates of unemployment, political repression, and the paralysis of state institutions, as well as corruption, divisions, and disloyalty within military institutions (in particular in countries where the military had a dominant political and economic role).

In analyzing these momentous political events sweeping the region, this chapter does not offer a definitive account of the Arab Spring, nor can it claim any predictive power, since the ongoing events associated with the Arab Spring are driven by a multitude of complex factors and the “processes of change in the region have often been subtle and gradual, with pressure mounting until the point of where new forms of politics suddenly became possible.”<sup>8</sup> Any attempts to establish neat causality will be inadequately faced with the importance of “micro- and meso-level transitions—that is gradual, interrelated changes in political, economic and social spheres that, like slowly moving tectonic plates, eventually create the conditions conducive to earth-shattering events.”<sup>9</sup> Upheavals associated with political transformations are inherently fluid, unpredictable, and therefore not easily “theorizable.”

This chapter discusses briefly these and other significant issues from political, social, and economic perspectives, inquiring into whether common structural problems did indeed characterize the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region in the lead up to the Arab Spring. More importantly, the chapter examines whether such structural deficiencies play a significant role in shaping and even predicting the prospects for genuine progress toward democratization and sociopolitical stability.

### *The Failure of the “Rentierism” Approach*

The Arab Spring erupted because of the cumulative failures of successive economic policies, and not just because of a lack of political reforms. In classical Islamic thought, justice is always privileged over all other sociopolitical considerations including democracy (the importance of the notion of the “just ruler” is highlighted in the classical Islamic scholarship of *Ibn Khaldun*, *Ibn Taymiyyah*, and others). Any serious analysis of the current political upheavals across the region must therefore account for the underlying social and economic failures. Indeed, the Arab world has seen a long-standing paralysis of government institutions to meet social needs, provide safety nets for the poor, and undertake serious efforts toward redistribution of wealth.

In terms of the major macroeconomic options pursued by post-colonial autocratic regimes across the region, the adoption of what has become known as the “Washington model” in the Arab region led to a modernizing of poverty rather than a modernizing of national economies. This is best illustrated by the gradual retreat of the Arab state’s role in alleviating

poverty, reflecting the neoliberal assumption that the private sector would fill the gap through investment and job creation. Yet, this private sector intervention did not occur at the required level. The official discourse of addressing poverty thus became about minimizing the effects of unemployment through the administration of what can be termed limited and ineffective “pain relief” measures (and even in this regard not all states were able to pursue such band-aid approaches). But as extensive studies elsewhere have shown,<sup>10</sup> the only effective and durable solution for poverty reduction is economic growth and job creation. There has never been an emphasis in the MENA region on full employment as an effective path toward fighting poverty and social inequality, as has been the case in many East Asian countries.

Historically, job creation has been sustained through industrialization, as history shows in the context of Western and, more recently, some Asian economies (witness, e.g., the so-called late industrialization in the cases of South Korea and China). Industrialization efforts have never been widely undertaken in the Arab world. Furthermore, many Arab countries exhibit a lack of familiarity with, or interest in, Asian experiences; the dominant model they are exposed to is neoliberalism as exemplified by the USA. Part of the problem with neoliberal policies is not so much the ideological flaws, although that may be the case in certain areas, but rather an incompatibility with the socioeconomic realities of the Arab world. For example, the insistence on wage flexibility as a way of maintaining sector viability and labor market participation is very problematic in the context of Arab countries, where it actually leads to deeper entrenchment of poverty in rural regions and generally among lower socioeconomic classes.

According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the rural population represented about 41% of the total population of Arab countries in 2005, and the majority of these citizens (94%) were categorized among the low to lower medium income groups.<sup>11</sup> In this context, the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) has played a key role in enabling the poorest rural communities to attempt to overcome poverty and unemployment.

As stated in a recent study by IFAD, the general high rate of unemployment represents one of the most pressing challenges in the region, particularly among young people.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, the International Labor Organization stated that high unemployment rates were affected by the global financial crisis, which erupted in 2008 in the financial systems of

developed countries.<sup>13</sup> The global financial crisis accentuated youth unemployment, which was estimated at 24.8% in 2010, escalating to 33.3% among young Arab women. At the same time, wages have remained stagnant with an average income among rural population of around US\$350 per year and with more than 21% overall living on less than US\$2 per day.<sup>14</sup> There is also the problem of the distorted economic development approach, characterized by indices such as the low percentage of female work participation in relation to the total population: 45% in the Arab world as opposed to more than 60%, globally.<sup>15</sup>

More critical, perhaps, is the significant vulnerability of Arab economies to international economic fluctuations given their compositions; for example, they are particularly exposed to volatile commodity markets, most significantly oil, and global economic conditions, which impact tourism. This means that most Arab countries, irrespective of their wealth, resources, and geography, are still very much dependent on external influences for their domestic livelihoods including regional inter-dependency. This inter-regional dependency problem has been accentuated by the fact that the direction of domestic investment has been predominantly in non-productive sectors, such as real estate or hospitality, as opposed to industry or agriculture.

This situation means that science and technology and more general research and development are not well supported. In fact, less than 0.5% of gross domestic product (GDP) is used for research and development, as compared to 1.5 to 2% in industrial countries which, when combined with the lack of any innovation agenda in the Arab world, creates a significant knowledge gap in relation to regional and international competitors.<sup>16</sup> Any current engagement with a genuine democratization process in Arab Spring countries therefore requires a systematic examination of successive failures pertaining to the politics of economic development.

In short, the failure to undertake meaningful economic development and the lack of any kind of political reform meant that on the eve of the Arab Spring many authoritarian regimes of the Arab world no longer held any kind of legitimacy. The social contract that regulated the relationship between these Arab regimes and their people had rested for decades on the implicit exchange of a minimum standard of living for some degree of loyalty to the regime.<sup>17</sup> As the state proved increasingly unable to guarantee this minimum safety, the various regimes across the region were increasingly exposed to the risks of a growing legitimacy deficit, culminating in the events of 2011.

## DIFFERING OUTCOMES ON THE POLITICAL TRANSITION PATH

Despite these apparent common root causes, in particular from the point of view of political economy, the Arab countries are by no means similar in terms of social and political development during the post-colonial decades. As Rex Brynen et al., explain:

There was or is [no] single Arab authoritarianism; rather, there is an array of political settings with histories, structural conditions, and dynamics that share both similar and strikingly dissimilar characteristics. The politics of Ben Ali's Tunisia were very different from those of Saleh's Yemen or the Khalifa monarchy in Bahrain, and nothing anywhere quite resembled Qaddafi's Libya. The dynamics of opposition and protest in those countries, although linked, have also been quite different.<sup>18</sup>

The post-revolution trajectories of the Arab Spring states developed differently in each of the countries involved. For example, some uprisings quickly toppled dictatorial regimes, as in the case of Tunisia and Egypt, while others, like in Syria and Libya, face more protracted resistance. This can be explained from a Gramscian viewpoint in terms of the strength of pre-existing civil society, by which “the more cohesive and integrated the civil society, and the more fragile or delegitimized the state, the greater the likelihood of revolutionary success (at least during the first stage of the revolution).”<sup>19</sup> That is, the success of a revolutionary movement to arise with significant swiftness to topple an established regime can be dependent on society-specific characteristics for its capacity to build a post-revolution consensus during the transition phase.

Compounding the general challenges faced by Arab states, each state has its own ethnic, tribal, religious/sectarian, and political dynamics, all of which are factors that can influence the outcome of the transition process. In analyzing how these specific conditions create different consequences across the stages of a revolution, Arab regimes can generally be classified into three different types:

Homogeneous initiators (the states that trigger revolutionary contagions); divided authoritarian states (those that follow the initiators and that experience prolonged violence); and divided wealthy monarchical regimes (which may be able to avoid, or at least forestall, revolution).<sup>20</sup>

Tunisia is relatively homogeneous with regard to national identity, tribal, and religious groups within its respective society. To a large extent, this homogeneity and cohesion facilitated and enabled the creation of a united mass movement against the fragile regime. Homogeneity, under these circumstances, facilitated “efforts by revolutionary movements to create a unifying collective ideology.”<sup>21</sup> In contrast, socioculturally heterogeneous and, to a degree, divided authoritarian states, such as Libya, Syria, and Yemen, saw their uprisings launch at a slower pace and face greater resistance. These societies are often split along sectarian or tribal lines that also overlap with socioeconomic stratifications. Sustaining revolutionary movements in such societies is difficult as challenges to ruling authorities may degenerate into sectarian power struggles or even outright civil war—as in the case of Syria—or a state of lawlessness and civil chaos driven by ethnic or tribal groups—as is the case with Libya.

Ethnic, religious, and tribal heterogeneity in the context of revolutionary moments therefore have the potential to impede efforts toward developing the type of unified post-revolutionary processes that can sustain and secure the consolidation stage. These country-specific sociocultural characteristics, along with other variables—most notably, strength of civil society and involvement of the military in domestic politics—are also important in shaping the consolidation stage, with a significant level of variation observed across the region. In Tunisia, for example, human capital and civil society are generally more developed than in Egypt, facilitating more opportunities for post-revolutionary political transition and security stabilization and, consequently, creating a stronger basis for consolidating early revolutionary achievements. On the other hand, Egypt’s military institution has been far more powerful and influential than either its civil society organizations or the corresponding military institution in Tunisia. As a result, the Egyptian post-revolution transitional course has been characterized by a deep ideological power struggle between the military and the Islamists, culminating in the events of June 30, 2013, and the overthrow of the Muslim Brotherhood’s elected president, Mohamed Morsi. While similar underlying conditions led to the uprisings and rapid toppling of the autocratic regimes in both Tunisia and Egypt (indeed the same revolutionary slogans were used across the two North African countries), the consolidation phase has highlighted the primacy of country-specificity, particularly in relation to key national institutions, resulting in different management strategies, divergent revolutionary outcomes, and possibly different prospects for revolutionary consolidation and democratic transition.<sup>22</sup>

## FROM REVOLUTIONARY FERVOR TO POLITICAL TRANSITION: THE CASE OF TUNISIA

Tunisia, the birthplace of the Arab Spring, has so far become the first Arab country to succeed in making significant progress toward political reform and democratic transition. It has managed to draft and adopt a progressive new constitution and install a non-partisan government of technocrats to prepare and oversee the next round of parliamentary and presidential elections. In general, the transition toward stable democratic governance is characterized by three key stages: a breakdown of authoritarianism; a transition phase; and then the onset of a democratization process, which is supposed to produce “democratic rule.”<sup>23</sup> Even in the best of circumstances, however, “the path to reform is rocky, as ideological preferences and contradictory interests clash at every decision.”<sup>24</sup>

Social scientists often assume that it is possible to analyze, understand, and in some cases even determine the causal factors behind important social and political phenomena. Indeed, in the context of the contemporary Arab world, there has been a tendency in social sciences to apply an almost pre-imposed “deterministic approach” that ignores the “potential of non-Islamist civic movements in the region...and even the idea that actors in the Middle East have choices.”<sup>25</sup>

In the case of Tunisia, and in addition to its unique sociodemographic attributes, some of the critical factors that led to the relative success of its revolutionary consolidation and transition phase include the strength of its civil society and its contribution to the political transition at various stages of the revolution; the limited role of the military; and the nature of the main Islamist party as exemplified in its post-electoral strategic political alliance with secular leftist parties (to form the Troika government). It is these conditions that saw many analysts declare Tunisia as the Arab country most likely to achieve genuine democratization.<sup>26</sup>

### *The Strength of Civil Society Organizations and Their Critical Role in the Revolution*

Tunisia has a sizable and relatively well-educated middle class with a history of encouraging and supporting women’s socioeconomic rights since the early days of independence in 1956 (through the socially progressive Personal Status Code). Even well before its independence, Tunisia had a strong trade union movement that eventually played a significant role in the independence struggle as well in post-independence nation building.



In comparison to other Arab countries, Tunisia “has had relatively well-developed civil society structures for a long time; the labor movement, strongly represented by the country’s labor union umbrella organization, the Tunisian General Labor Union,” is well established.<sup>27</sup> In the period from 1988 to 2009, the number of civil society organizations increased from nearly 2,000 to over 9,000.<sup>28</sup> In particular, “women’s organizations have long been very active and well organized.”<sup>29</sup> The vibrancy, resilience, and reach of Tunisia’s civil society organizations proved critical in the toppling of the Ben Ali regime, as well as in the post-revolution transitional phase. But how did Tunisia’s civil society organizations oust an authoritarian regime, adapt to revolutionary changes, and remain unstifled in the midst of transition?<sup>30</sup>

With regard to ousting the regime, Shelley Deane argues that Tunisia’s civil society organizations were able to mobilize activists collectively and create internal bonding between various groups and actors. This “spirit of solidarity” not only sustained the revolutionary drive, but also shaped the post-revolution institutional reform of freedom of association and civil society activity.<sup>31</sup>

In terms of adapting to change, Tunisia’s civil society organizations and, in particular, the new networks of associations developed during the transition phase, negotiated and achieved significant institutional reform guaranteeing the constitutional right of association and assembly for groups and citizens alike.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, on paper, Tunisia’s new laws of association are a veritable to-do list for civil society organizations reform. Under the new laws, these organizations are encouraged to testify, comment on, and influence pending government policy and legislation. New religious and politically driven actors are emerging to challenge the existing transition coalition.<sup>33</sup>

Tunisian civil society organization’s most critical contribution has been manifested in ensuring the so-called “twin tolerations” of religious groups and secular individuals by the state. This objective, however, has been disturbed by spikes in political violence and terrorist acts perpetuated by extreme jihadists with links to external al-Qaeda affiliated organizations. More important, though, have been Tunisia’s civil society organization’s critical role in mediating political crises during the transition phase, in particular the role played by the trade unions in organizing and presiding over the ultimately successful national dialogue. The main Tunisian union, (the General Union of Tunisian Workers (UGTT)), has historically played a pivotal role in the independence struggle and stood up for workers’ rights even during the autocratic rule of Ben Ali.<sup>34</sup> Since the demise of the

dictatorship, the UGTT, with the support of the Tunisian League for Human Rights, the Lawyers Union, and the Doctors Union, has emerged as a key national player in the transition phase, mediating between various political protagonists and brokering several rounds of national dialogue that ultimately mitigated political crises. This was especially the case following the assassinations of leading politicians from leftist secular opposition parties, Chokri Belaïd and Mohamed Brahmi.<sup>35</sup> This constructive leadership role performed by UGTT and other civil society organizations contributed to post-revolution consolidation and was sustained by an historical legacy of industrial militancy and grassroots organizational strength.

### *The New Constitution, Electoral Commission, and Transitional Justice Initiatives*

Issues pertaining to transitional justice have proved to be the most challenging for successive governments since the overthrow of the autocratic regime of Ben Ali. The breakthrough came in 2013 when the Ministry of Human Rights and Transitional Justice succeeded in getting the “Organic Law on Establishing and Organizing Transitional Justice” adopted by the Constitutional Assembly. This breakthrough was supported by various actors in civil society, as reflected in its first article, which defines transitional justice:

In this law, Transitional Justice shall mean an integrated process of mechanisms and methods used to understand and deal with past human rights violations by revealing their truths, and holding those responsible accountable, providing reparations for the victims and restituting them in order to achieve national reconciliation, preserve and document the collective memory, guarantee the non-recurrence of such violations and transition from an authoritarian state to a democratic system, which contributes to consolidating the system of human rights.<sup>36</sup>

This landmark law deals with key aspects of transitional justice, including memory, accountability, reparation, and reconciliation. Article 16 of this transitional law establishes the independent “Truth and Dignity Commission,” which will include a legal entity with extensive powers to investigate, conduct public hearings, call witnesses, produce reports, access confidential information, and deliberate on human rights abuses dating from July 1, 1955, up to the Commission’s establishment date.

On January 26, 2014, Tunisia’s National Constituent Assembly voted overwhelmingly to adopt a new Constitution.<sup>37</sup> This is widely viewed as a

landmark accomplishment, given the difficulty of achieving political consensus, tensions between Islamists and secularists, and ongoing social and economic unrest. The new constitution asserts Tunisia's Muslim identity, but how it frames and provides for civil liberties are seen as a victory for secularists. The vote followed a political agreement under which Tunisia's main Islamist party, Ennahda, agreed to hand over the political reins to a technocratic, non-partisan government. This agreement ended a months-long political crisis after the assassinations of Belaïd and Brahmi in 2013.<sup>38</sup>

The new constitution represents a major victory for secularist parties and for pragmatists within Ennahda, who opted for consensus politics instead of an all-or-nothing approach.<sup>39</sup> It is hailed as one of the most progressive constitutional documents in the region, with a number of its proclamations, for example, on gender representation in politics, exceeding some European allowances. Most notably, Article Two, which cannot be amended, states that, "Tunisia is a civil state based on citizenship, the will of the people, and the supremacy of law." Article Three states that, "the people are sovereign and the source of authority, which is exercised through the people's representatives and by referendum." These provisions appear to directly counter a foundational argument by many Islamists that religious law trumps civil law. There is no reference to *Sharia* (Islamic law) in the constitution. "Freedom of conscience and belief" (Article Six) is guaranteed, along with gender equality (Article 21), freedom of expression and information (Articles 31–32), freedom of assembly and individual property rights (Article 41), and some aspects of due process (Article 27). The constitution also creates a mixed presidential system, with a directly elected president/head of state who exercises certain powers—notably over defense and foreign affairs—but shares executive authorities with the legislature. This model was preferred by secularist parties, who saw it as creating balances of power, while Ennahda officials had expressed preference for a legislative system, with a president selected by the legislature. Some observers have expressed concern that the mixed system could prove unwieldy in practice or prone to political deadlock.<sup>40</sup>

### *Consensus Politics: The Troika and Ennahda's Surrender of Power*

Ennahda won 90 seats out of a possible 217 in the National Constituent Assembly, the highest share of any political party. Instead of insisting on governing in its own right, Ennahda chose to govern with as many parties as possible and succeeded in forming the governing Troika coalition with

two non-Islamist parties.<sup>41</sup> Two years later, and following the assassinations of Belaïd and Brahmi, Ennahda agreed to a national dialogue mediated by civil society organizations, accepting a hand over of power to a technocratic government, which took place in January 2014. But the post-Arab Spring was still burdened with the twin challenges of economic stagnation and terrorist security threats.<sup>42</sup>

The retreat from government and its internal divisions do not indicate that Ennahda is no longer powerful—it remains well situated to influence the next phase of Tunisia’s transition. In addition, Ennahda’s compromises established “short-term tactical moves taken in response to an existential threat but motivations may matter less than the resulting pattern of behavior.”<sup>43</sup> Unlike the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Ennahda selected a trajectory that kept the Islamists inside the political system and the transition on track. It is considered by most observers to be well placed to perform very strongly in the upcoming parliamentary elections, and the Islamist movement will likely remain a significant political force for the foreseeable future.<sup>44</sup>

In June 2014, Ennahda announced it would not field its own candidate for the presidential elections; instead, it would support other more consensual candidates not affiliated with the Islamist party. This development, as Tariq Ramadan has also argued, is a clear indication that Ennahda not only heeded the Egyptian lesson, but, more importantly, does not view ultimate political power as residing in official political authority. The parliamentary elections held on October 26, 2014, resulted in a victory for the secular centrist Nidaa Tounes party, with Ennahda remaining the second largest political entity in the country. Similarly, presidential elections saw the Nidaa Tounes presidential candidate, Beji Caid Essebsi, win against his main rival from the Troika, outgoing President Moncef Marzouki. Despite the electoral loss of Ennahda, perhaps the most surprising aspect of these elections was the very poor performance of many social-democratic parties led by prominent public figures known for their opposition to the Ben Ali dictatorship. Clearly, the Tunisian electorate is seeking more than just a “militancy credit” from its new political class; rather security, employment, and economic growth are high on the agenda. The “militancy credit” concept refers to opposition parties and human rights’ advocates, who had a history of opposing the Ben Ali dictatorship before the revolution and who expected their “militancy” would ensure for post-revolution electoral success.

## THE CHALLENGES FOR POST-REVOLUTION CONSOLIDATION IN TUNISIA

The foremost challenges Tunisia faces in its ongoing political transition include the rise of religious violence represented by Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia (AST), a group affiliated with al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb; the elusiveness of practical and deep reconciliation between Islamist and non-Islamist political parties; and the lack of a clear and practical plan for improving the economy.<sup>45</sup>

### *The Rise of Religious Violence*

Tunisia's small jihadi Salafist community has had a significant impact on the country's domestic political scene since the ousting of the Ben Ali regime. Religiously conservative by definition, the influence and prominence of jihadi Salafis are increasing, particularly as the economy stagnates. Against the backdrop of an overwhelmingly progressive moderate constituency, the Salafists have been advocating the adoption of *Sharia* law in an attempt to undermine the consensus achieved through civil society and held together by Tunisia's various transitional governments. Broad-based Salafi calls for increased restrictions on civil liberties are aimed at undermining Tunisia's new social contract as articulated in the newly adopted progressive Constitution.

In terms of specific groups currently active in Tunisia, Salafis are increasingly divided between constitutional Islamists, like the Islah Front Party (Reform Front Party), licensed in May 2012, and political–military organizations, such as AST. The discourse of the Islah Front is aimed at engaging the political process with a view of winning power electorally by constitutional means.<sup>46</sup> This agenda is different from other jihadi Salafi groups, such as AST, which advocates the use of violence to achieve its objectives. AST is closely linked to neighboring al-Qaeda affiliated groups throughout the Maghreb.

AST is held accountable for the assassination of secular politicians and thought to be responsible for the worst of the political attacks on the US Embassy in Tunis, in September 2012, and attacks on Tunisian soldiers, in July 2013. While some Salafis have taken Islamic law into their own hands through vigilantism, another small, but growing, group is becoming actively involved in politics and in civil society. In Ennahda's view, Salafism

is a phenomenon imported from the Gulf region. Alfred Stepan and Juan Linz support this argument by stating that the secularist dictators Habib Bourguiba and Ben Ali had almost destroyed Islamic education within Tunisia, leaving a space that, “Gulf-financed theocratic extremists rushed to fill amidst the new conditions of greater religious liberty.”<sup>47</sup>

The relationship between Ennahda and Salafi groups is complicated, often characterized as a love–hate relationship, with double discourse deployed by Ennahda and aimed accordingly at different audiences.<sup>48</sup> Ennahda initially relied on dialogue, encouraging Salafis to organize in political parties and viewing Salafism as a movement capable of moderation through education and political engagement. Many in the Salafist camp, however, are unhappy with Ennahda’s compromise on *Sharia* in the constitution and their decision to hand over power to a non-Islamist government. This frustration will surely affect Tunisia’s fragile transition.<sup>49</sup> For example, Sheikh Mawlid Ali El-Moujahed, president of the Asalah Party (one of the Salafi political parties), cited the adoption of the constitution as “a turning point” in the relationship with Ennahda, insisting that the party would suffer the consequences:

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.<sup>50</sup>

In Mansoor Moaddel’s 2013 report, only a minority of Tunisians are in favor of an Islamic government, with a clear majority of respondents favoring secular politics; between 70 and 80% strongly agree or agree that their country would be a better place if religion and politics were separated, and a minority supported *Sharia* law versus sectarian laws. The findings also show only 34% of the respondents have some degree of trust in the Salafists. In general, the findings in Moaddel’s report show that most Tunisians are interested in pragmatic policies to modernize their country and only a small percentage favor radical political activities, even among those who favor *Sharia*.<sup>51</sup>

### *The Polarization Between Islamists and Non-Islamists*

One of the more significant challenges to the transitional process in Tunisia has been the ongoing polarized ideological struggle between Islamists and secularists, which has led to a number of political crises, most notably

following the 2013 assassinations. In addition to this ideological split, Tunisia's political spectrum is also characterized by a diversity of Islamists, as well as non-Islamist voices. In terms of electoral representation, Ennahda's share of the vote was 41% in the 2011 elections; the remainder went to a mix of fractured secularist, leftist, communist, and old regime elements. Many of the centrist political groups have merged into the new powerful political player Nidaa Tounes as a way of creating a political counterbalance to Ennahda. This new political actor is supported by the business sector and other wealthy former Ben Ali loyalists who are eager to take political advantage of Ennahda's recent struggles.<sup>52</sup> Non-Islamist parties almost universally view Ennahda as soft on terrorism and express fears over Ennahda's relationship with Salafists, particularly those accused of engaging in anti-liberal activities and outright violence.

The other concern among non-Islamists is Ennahda's effort to influence the state bureaucracy with appointments of their sympathizers. These appointments, from a non-Islamist perspective, serve as an attempt to strengthen Ennahda's control over the state apparatus, especially after it surrendered political power. These moves are viewed as weakening the state through replacement of experienced civil servants with unskilled bureaucrats loyal to Ennahda, still considered by some non-Islamists to be Tunisia's version of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. As a consequence, relations between the party and some states in the Gulf were damaged over ideological and political disagreements pertaining to events across the region. Indeed, following Ennahda's withdrawal from government, countries such as the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, ardent critics of the Muslim Brotherhood, now appear keen to assist Tunisia.<sup>53</sup>

### *Lack of Clear, Practical Plans for Tunisia's Economy*

Since 2011, the economy has encountered significant problems and has yet to recover. According to the World Bank, Tunisia's unemployment rate remained at 15.7% in the last quarter of 2013, and GDP growth slowed to 2.7% at the end of the same year. Foreign direct investment remains below pre-2011 levels.<sup>54</sup> The World Bank estimated a financial shortfall for 2013 of 6.2% of GDP.<sup>55</sup> This deficit is due, primarily, to increased public wages and subsidies, which tripled between 2010 and 2013.<sup>56</sup>

Non-Islamist parties, in particular, voice their concern over the state of the economy, blaming the failure in economic development on the incompetence of Ennahda's appointees. Yet, Nidaa Tounes and the rest of

the secular opposition are short on clear and practical solutions, offering little in the way of explicit programs or policies. Neither Ennahda nor Nidaa Tounes has a clear plan for tackling structural problems or developing the economy. Many on the Tunisian Left are opposed to both Nidaa Tounes and Ennahda and are openly critical of what they consider to be Nidaa's regressive economic policy, arguing that these are designed to protect the interests of the wealthy and those close to the old regime.

## CONCLUSION

Perhaps the most significant outcome of the Arab Spring has been the shaking-up of the sociopolitical status quo in the region, even within countries where no popular uprisings were witnessed. This political diversification is summarized by Martin Beck and Simone Hüser in a political rule matrix that employs two key criteria, political transition and authoritarianism on the one hand, and stability or instability on the other.<sup>57</sup>

Even though Tunisia became the first Arab country in more than three decades to receive a ranking of three for political rights on the Freedom House scale in 2012, there have been "some disturbing realities," that present great challenges to the democratization process.<sup>58</sup> The polarization between Islamists and non-Islamists remains a serious problem, as do the threats of terrorist and religious violence.

There is no doubt that transitions and political reforms are truly atop the political agenda in the Arab world. Yet, "Arab countries are still a long way from democracy. Electoral democracies and semi-authoritarian regimes are likely to emerge as the dominant political form in the Middle East, as they did in much of the post-Soviet world after the end of the Cold War."<sup>59</sup> As many analysts warn, it would be a mistake to assume the neo-Mamluk rulers have truly gone.<sup>60</sup> The depths to which these autocratic rulers have penetrated the political processes across the Arab world almost guarantees that expunging them altogether will take time. Indeed, it is likely that the remnants of these neo-Mamluk regimes will attempt to reassert themselves as legitimate political actors and, in the process, regain a level of political influence, if not outright political power. However, as the most recent round of parliamentary and presidential elections has shown the Tunisian electorate has been able to display a sophisticated ability to discern between political parties and opportunistic politicians. The results have created a new balance between two strong political parties (the secularist Nidaa Tounes and the Islamist Ennahda) with a raft of



smaller progressive parties holding the balance of power. Thus, the future for post-revolution Tunisia looks brighter, even if darker threats—at the level of security, politics, and economics—may never disappear altogether from the national landscape.

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