

4. TUNISIA: CONFRONTING EXTREMISM

*Haim Malka*¹

Jihadi-salafi groups thrived in Tunisia after the government of Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali fell in January 2011. They swiftly took advantage of political uncertainty, ideological freedom, and porous borders to expand both their capabilities and area of operations. By the end of 2012 two strains of jihadi-salafism had emerged in the country. The first, which grew directly out of the revolutionary fervor and political openings of the Arab uprisings, prioritized and promoted religious outreach to mainstream audiences, often through social activism.² Ansar al Shari'a in Tunisia was the largest and most organized group taking this approach. The second strain followed al Qaeda's traditional method, with organized bands of underground fighters who emerged periodically to launch violent attacks against security forces and the government. This strain was represented by Tunisian jihadi-salafists calling themselves the Okba ibn Nafaa Brigade who established a base in Tunisia's Chaambi Mountains

1. Sections of this chapter are drawn from two previously published papers: Haim Malka and William Lawrence, "Jihadi-Salafism's Next Generation," Center for Strategic and International Studies, October 2013, <http://csis.org/publication/jihadi-salafisms-next-generation>; and Haim Malka, "The Struggle for Religious Identity in Tunisia and the Maghreb," Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 2014, <http://csis.org/publication/struggle-religious-identity-tunisia-and-maghreb>.

2. For a detailed analysis of hybrid jihadi-salafism and efforts to combine extremist ideology with social and political activism, see Malka and Lawrence, "Jihadi-Salafism's Next Generation."

on the Tunisian-Algerian border and launched numerous attacks against security forces.³ The first model was primarily a political threat, while the second represented a security threat. Both models overlapped in that they shared the common goal of replacing the existing political order with an Islamic state and were guided by jihadi-salafi ideology, though each pursued a different strategy.

Jihadi-salafi activism of both types poses particular challenges to Tunisia as the country transitions to a competitive political system after decades of authoritarian rule. Until the 2011 revolution, Tunisia had largely been shielded from the extremist violence that had plagued neighboring Algeria and the rest of the region over the last few decades. But as Tunisia wrote its new constitution and moved toward new parliamentary and presidential elections, extremist violence heightened tensions between secularists and political Islamists in the debate over the role of religion in society⁴ and deepened fissures between Tunisia's different Islamist streams.

The evolution of these two distinct yet overlapping models represented a debate over jihadi-salafi strategy in Tunisia after the fall of Ben Ali. Was Tunisia a land of da'wa (spiritual outreach and proselytization) or a land of jihad—in practical terms, should jihadi-salafists use direct violence against the state, or slowly build support through political and social activity in order to further their goals? The debate was complicated by the raging conflict in Syria against the Assad regime, which attracted hundreds and then thousands of young Tunisian men.⁵ The rural insurgency in Tunisia that pursued al Qaeda's tradi-

3. The Okba ibn Nafaa Brigade was officially recognized by Tunisian authorities in December 2012 following the shooting death of a Tunisian National Guard member in the city of Kasserine.

4. The role of religion in society and Tunisian identity dominated much of the constitutional debate. The constitution was approved in January 2014, and Article 6 lays out the government's broad understanding of the role of religion.

5. Estimates as of November 2014 suggest approximately 3,000 Tunisian citizens fighting in Syria, making Tunisians one of the largest national groups participating in the conflict. See David D. Kirkpatrick, "New Freedoms in Tunisia Drive Support for ISIS," *New York Times*, October 21, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/22/world/africa/new-freedoms-in-tunisia-drive-support-for-isis.html?_r=0.

tional strategy was clearly violent. In the more politically active urban areas, developments were more ambiguous: jihadi-salafists took advantage of political freedom to organize, preach, and build constituencies. For them this was an important stage in creating a new social and political order based on Islamic law. Even as many urged jihad in Syria, local jihadi-salafi leaders counseled caution at home. Despite their predilection for vigilante violence and intimidation, they avoided confronting security forces or the state directly. For a time, Tunisia became a test case for jihadi-salafi experiments with political openings.

Tunisia's Ennahda-led government responded slowly at first to the growing jihadi-salafi threat. The Ennahda-led government's ambivalence was shaped by a combination of politics and ideology. After decades of repression, a wide range of Islamist ideas flourished following the fall of Ben Ali: political Islamists, salafists, traditional Tunisian religious leaders, and jihadi-salafists all competed in an open market of ideas. As the strongest and most organized political and social force, Ennahda sought to own this new political space by representing all Islamists. Yet a deepening political crisis reinforced by two assassinations in 2013 and rising violence against security forces changed Ennahda's calculations. The group outlawed Ansar al Shari'a, made personnel changes at the Ministry of the Interior, allowed security forces to pursue more aggressive tactics against militants, and eventually agreed to hand over power to a technocratic interim government—one that made security one of its top priorities after taking control in January 2014.

In the ensuing months these different threats and models of jihad evolved, intersected and became increasingly indistinguishable. The government has tackled jihadi-salafism in different yet complementary ways. First, it has boosted security force capabilities and pursued more aggressive and coherent law enforcement and counterterrorism operations. Security forces increased operations against militant individuals, safe houses, and bases while devoting additional resources and manpower to the fight. Second, the government has sought to fight extremist ideology and its appeal by redefining and promoting a Tunisian

national Islamic identity, a process it has begun by centralizing control of mosques and religious space. While the security track is based on police and military action, the struggle against violent extremist ideology is more complicated and subject to intense debate within Tunisian society. Tunisia's new government and future governments will face the challenge of addressing the hard security threat jihadi-salafists pose both tactically and ideologically while avoiding the overly broad repression of religious expression that was a hallmark of past authoritarian regimes.

SALAFISM AND JIHADI-SALAFISM IN TUNISIA

Salafism, in both its violent and nonviolent forms, represents a rebellion against local Islamic traditions and practices. It challenges both the authority and legitimacy of local Islamic interpretations. Though salafism has competed with North African Islamic traditions for centuries, this struggle has intensified since the Arab uprisings of 2011, which created public space for both nonviolent salafism and violent extremist ideology to spread.

For centuries Tunisia boasted some of Islam's most important seats of religious education, in particular the Zaytouna Mosque. Local ulema played an important political as well as religious role into the late years of Ottoman control of Tunisia, opposing many modernizing reforms and the penetration of European influence into Tunisia.⁶ The decline of the Ottoman Empire in North Africa and the advent of European colonization undermined Tunisia's traditional religious institutions, though the ulema continued to play an important social and educational role in Tunisian society and, on occasion, sided with the French protectorate authorities to check the power of local reformers. Tunisia was also one of the centers of the Islamic modernist movement—which sought to embrace modernity while maintaining the cultural centrality of Islam and Arabic—around the turn of the twentieth century.⁷

6. Kenneth Perkins, *A History of Modern Tunisia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 20–24.

7. *Ibid.*, 64–65. The reformers in this camp were known in Arabic as *salafiyya* and, like contemporary salafists, advocated returning to Islamic source texts to overcome the Muslim world's stagnation; but they interpreted the Qur'an and Hadith in light of modern conditions and did not seek a puritanical return to past culture

It was the independence movement led by the country's first president, Habib Bourguiba, in the 1950s that imposed state secularism and broke the power and influence of Zaytouna. Bourguiba overhauled Tunisia's religious institutions, weakened the ulema (in part by confiscating all land endowments, or *habous* property, controlled by religious institutions⁸), and watered down the content of Islamic education and practice. Mosques were locked except during prayer times, and libraries were emptied or shuttered. Most importantly, Bourguiba's government dismantled Tunisia's prestigious seat of learning and transferred Zaytouna's educational functions to the University of Tunis.⁹ Religious education was transformed into an academic discipline. For the next half century, the state security apparatus tightly controlled Tunisian Islam and religious education.¹⁰

Both Bourguiba and his successor, Ben Ali, also harshly repressed efforts by their opponents to advance an Islamist political project in Tunisia. Bourguiba saw himself as the enlightened, modernizing father of modern Tunisia, and he began his tenure by forcing Salah Ben Youssef, the leader of a faction that advocated a more Islamic, pan-Arab orientation for the country, into exile,¹¹ and putting many of his associates in prison. Remnants

and practices.

8. *Habous* is referred to as *waqf* or *awqaf* in other parts of the Muslim world. A debate over reviving *habous* in Tunisia will have a major impact on how mosques and religious institutions are funded. In 2013, some members of Ennahda tried to force through a new *habous* law that would have allowed the establishment of new endowments. The bill did not pass, but the issue will likely remain contentious.

9. Religious studies once administered by the Zaytouna Mosque were incorporated into the Higher Institute of Theology and the Higher Institute of Islamic Civilizations, both part of the University of Tunis.

10. After a broad crackdown against Islamists across Tunisia in the 1990s, salafi proselytism largely went underground, though some nonpolitical salafi preaching was tolerated.

11. Ben Youssef was from a family of merchants in Djerba and had closer ties to the religious establishment than Bourguiba. He espoused an uncompromising opposition to colonialism, grounded in Arab-Islamic values and a commitment to solidarity with other Middle Eastern and North African countries. He argued that Bourguiba was an agent of France and the West in general. Ali Mahjoubi, "Habib Bourguiba et Le Choix Occidental," in *Habib Bourguiba et l'établissement de l'Etat National*, ed. Abdeljalil Temimi (Zaghuan, Tunisia: Fondation Temimi Pour La Recherche Scientifique et l'Information, 2000), 105.

of the “Youssefists,” along with religious authorities stripped of much of their power and other disaffected Tunisians, regrouped to found the Mouvement de la Tendance Islamique (MTI) in the 1970s. The MTI successfully supported some candidates for parliamentary elections in the 1980s, even as its leaders were arrested for defaming the president and speaking out against the state’s stronghold on religious institutions and expression.¹² Bourguiba’s hatred of this movement was so fierce that in 1987, after terrorist bombings in Sousse and Monastir for which the MTI denied responsibility, Ben Ali had to talk Bourguiba down from permitting the execution of top Islamist leaders—including Rachid al-Ghannouchi.¹³

When Ben Ali came to power in November 1987, it appeared at first that the political process might be opened to allow Islamists to participate. In the lead-up to the 1990 elections, the MTI changed its name to Ennahda and lobbied for legalization along with other political parties. Opinion among Tunisian elites shifted against this political opening, however, when it became clear that Ennahda would do well in the elections. Ben Ali shifted course and eventually repressed the Islamist movement as harshly as Bourguiba had, seeing it as an existential threat to Tunisian politics and society.¹⁴

Despite this strict regulation, Tunisia and other Maghreb countries were not immune from salafism and other external ideological influences. In the 1970s and 1980s, workers who returned from the Gulf with savings also brought back stricter Islamic practices and ideas after exposure to Wahhabism. Wealthy Gulf donors supported local charities, mosques, and schools that promoted salafi teachings. Arabization policies in education during the 1980s also attracted teachers from Egypt, the Levant, and the Gulf who often brought salafi and Islamist ideology. With the introduction of satellite television and then

12. Perkins, *History*, 168.

13. *Ibid.*, 175. In August 1987, when the bombings occurred, Ben Ali served as interior minister. In October 1987 he was appointed prime minister.

14. Neil Hicks, *Promises Unfulfilled: Human Rights in Tunisia Since 1987* (New York: Lawyers Committee for Human Rights, 1993), 9–10, 46.

the Internet, charismatic sheikhs from Egypt and the Gulf could take their more puritanical and occasionally violent messages directly into people's homes.

These ideological seeds sprouted numerous salafi groups, which included some violent salafists committed to overthrowing governments across the Maghreb. As Algeria's civil war raged throughout the 1990s and Muammar el-Qaddafi sought to maintain his grip on power in Libya—and as fighters began to return to both countries from the conflict in Afghanistan—state security forces in Tunisia, Libya, Morocco, and Algeria imprisoned or killed thousands. Others fled to Afghanistan and Europe, where they formed various groups. The largest network of Tunisian jihadi-salafists formed the Tunisian Combatant Group, which cooperated with al Qaeda in Afghanistan and later al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).¹⁵ Prior to the 2011 uprising, the Ben Ali government kept a tight grip on the country's security. The most serious attack in the preceding decade occurred in April 2002, when a suicide bomber affiliated with al Qaeda blew up a truck outside of an historic synagogue in Djerba, killing 21 people, most of them foreign tourists.¹⁶

When the Ben Ali regime collapsed in 2011, nonviolent salafi and jihadi-salafi ideologies had been percolating in Tunisia for decades. Salafists presented people with a coherent set of ideas and actions amidst political and economic uncertainty. They were motivated and forceful, and they quickly established themselves in mosques across the country where they could spread their message. In contrast, Tunisia's traditional state-sponsored ulema had long been neglected and discredited for their subservience to the Bourguiba and Ben Ali regimes and were unequipped for the ideological struggle that would ensue.

15. Two Tunisians associated with the Tunisian Combatant Group (also known as the Tunisian Islamic Fighting Group) assassinated Ahmed Shah Massoud, the head of Afghanistan's anti-Taliban Northern Alliance, two days before the September 11, 2001, attacks.

16. "German Terror Link: Djerba Bombing Trial Begins in Paris," *Der Spiegel*, January 5, 2009, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/german-terror-link-djerba-bombing-trial-begins-in-paris-a-599485.html>.

JIHADI-SALAFISM AFTER THE UPRISINGS

Throughout most of 2011–2012, both jihadi-salafi streams focused on organization and recruitment. Without a security-minded autocrat in power, they suddenly enjoyed unprecedented freedom to organize and propagate their message. Their efforts were further aided by several local and regional circumstances.

First, a postrevolution prison amnesty released thousands of prisoners, many of whom had been arrested under Tunisia's 2003 antiterrorism law and further radicalized in prison.¹⁷ This provided a stream of potential new recruits. Many former leaders were also released from prison or returned from exile. Seifallah Ben Hassine, also known as Abu Iyadh al-Tunsi, a former leader of the Tunisian Combatant Group, was released from prison in 2011 and shortly thereafter founded Ansar al Shari'a with Tarek Maaroufi, another former Tunisian Combatant Group leader, who returned to Tunisia in March 2012 after spending time in a Belgian prison.¹⁸ Second, ongoing war and the disintegration of state authority in neighboring Libya provided a steady stream of weapons, while porous borders to the east (Libya) and west (Algeria) allowed fighters to move with fewer restrictions.¹⁹

17. According to a United Nations Human Rights Council report, "A total of 8,700 people benefited from this amnesty law either by being released from prison or—in the broad majority of cases—by being restored their political rights." See "Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms While Countering Terrorism, Martin Scheinin: Mission to Tunisia," UN document A/HRC/20/14/Add, March 14, 2012, 1, http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/RegularSession/Session20/A-HRC-20-14-Add1_en.pdf.

18. Tunsi fought in Afghanistan and was arrested in Turkey in 2003, when he was extradited to Tunisia. He was sentenced to 68 years in prison under the 2003 Terrorism Law. See Synda Tajine, "A Jihadist Comes Home and Tunisia Cracks Down," *Al Monitor*, September 20, 2012, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/politics/2012/09/has-tunisia-government-turned-against-the-salafists.html#>.

19. The border crossings with Libya at Jefara and Ben Guerdane are connected to the thriving arms markets that have been supplying jihadi-salafists as well as tribes and clans in southern Tunisia. Libyan militants have also been arrested for planning attacks against Tunisian security officials and government institutions. See Sam Kimball, "A Leaky Border Threatens Tunisia's Transition," *Foreign Policy*, May 27, 2014, http://transitions.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2014/05/27/a_leaky_border_threatens_tunisia_transition; "Tunisia Arrests Islamists from Libya, Says Were Planning Attacks," Reuters, May 21, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/05/22/us-tunisia-islamists-idUSBREA4L00I20140522>.

Third, the expanding conflict in Syria heightened extremist rhetoric and provided an even greater motive for young men to join militant organizations either in Tunisia, elsewhere in the Maghreb, or in Syria.

Politics also had an impact in two important ways. First, Tunisia's political polarization prevented effective cooperation between the Ennahda-led government and security forces dominated by personnel associated with the Ben Ali regime.²⁰ Anger at the role security forces played in upholding the Ben Ali regime and attempting to suppress the revolution against him was strong in the final days of the revolution and after it. The military's reputation was bolstered by its refusal to confront Tunisian demonstrators at the outset of the revolution, but the military was a small institution that Ben Ali had deliberately marginalized, and following the revolution its senior officer corps preferred to remain depoliticized. Following the National Constituent Assembly elections, the Ennahda-appointed interior minister, who had been imprisoned by the Ben Ali regime, clashed repeatedly with the police and security forces and dismantled key internal security branches. Ennahda also appointed its members and loyalists to key security positions within the Ministry of the Interior, causing friction with the ministry's rank and file, most of whom had been appointed under the previous regime. This tension undermined cooperation between the security services, weakened and divided the security apparatus, and prevented a clear national counterterrorism policy.

Second, the Ennahda-led government was ambivalent about religious extremism, for a combination of political and ideological reasons. As an Islamist organization that had previously been repressed, it had difficulty restricting other Islamists, and it failed to sufficiently condemn or act against the growing vigilante violence and incitement in 2011–2012. As a broad movement, Ennahda includes a conservative salafi faction that sympathized with and sought to protect young salafi and jihadi-

20. Ben Ali himself had emerged from the security services and had been head of the country's military security apparatus before taking over as president in 1987.

salafi activists.²¹ Many of these comparatively conservative leaders viewed more militant young activists, including members of Ansar al Shari'a, as wayward or rebellious children who needed to be protected. Finally, Ennahda resisted confronting jihadi-salafists for political purposes. It sought to represent a wide tent of Islamist views and co-opt salafists, in part to gain future votes.

In the first year after the revolution, jihadi-salafists largely avoided a head-on confrontation with the security services. Ansar al Shari'a focused on social hegemony, which it sought through demonstrations and intimidation of academics, artists, and liberal activists. It restricted its use of violence to vigilante attacks against individuals and property, which destroyed Sufi shrines and mausoleums that the group considers elements of *shirk*, or polytheism.²² Ansar al Shari'a's founding conference, held in 2011, attracted about 1,000 people. The following year the number of attendees grew to approximately 10,000. At its peak in 2012 it likely included 10,000 to 20,000 followers.²³ In addition to its active followers, Ansar al Shari'a attracted many sympathizers, who shared an ideological affinity with the movement and often benefited from the services it provided.

Though some within Ansar al Shari'a encouraged a subset of young people to abandon society for the Syrian front lines,

21. Among Ennahda members of the national constituent assembly who embraced salafi positions, Habib Ellouz and Sadeq Chorou were the most outspoken.

22. In January 2013, for example, salafists were accused of setting fire to the mausoleum of Sidi Bou Said, a Sufi sheikh buried near Tunis. See Roua Seghaier, "Thirty-Four Mausoleums in Tunisia Vandalized Since the Revolution," *Tunisia Live*, January 24, 2013, <http://www.tunisia-live.net/2013/01/24/thirty-four-mausoleums-in-tunisia-vandalized-since-the-revolution/#sthash.WJM2homQ.dpuf>.

23. *The Economist*, quoting a member of Ansar al Shari'a, claims the movement has 70,000 members, but that is likely a gross exaggeration. See "Dispatch from Tunisia: The Salafist Struggle," *Economist*, January 1, 2014, <http://www.economist.com/blogs/pomegranate/2014/01/dispatch-tunisia>. According to Tunisian press reports, Abu Iyadh al-Tunsi (the leader of Ansar al Shari'a in Tunisia) ordered 600 Tunisian followers currently in Syria back to Tunisia. But there is no clear evidence to support this claim or the assertion that Ansar al Shari'a controls Tunisian jihadi-salafists in Syria. See Anna Boyd, "Salafists' Desire to Attack Tunisian Government Grows as Jihadists Returning from Syria Likely to Boost their Capability," IHS Global Insight, December 6, 2013.

this new model of jihadi-salafism primarily sought to create mainstream networks that built local communities. Its leaders, such as Tunsi and Maaroufi, had previous al Qaeda affiliations, and its leading scholarly influences, such as Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, were prominent in al Qaeda circles. Yet, rather than focus on jihad against foreign “occupiers” or the state, these jihadi-salafi entrepreneurs sought local opportunities to spread their message through da‘wa. They did not reject violence as a necessary tool or in principle; instead, they advocated carefully planned and targeted violence that helped to build popular support and advance their goals, rather than indiscriminate violence against civilians or security forces that could undermine popular support.²⁴ Like the nonviolent salafists, they sought to promote their values through preaching and persuasion in the first instance, with the ultimate goal being the implementation of a strict version of Islamic law within an Islamic state.

What differentiated Ansar al Shari‘a during this period from armed groups such as the Okba ibn Nafaa Brigade—and made them more of a strategic threat—is that they were a part of Tunisian society.²⁵ Their leaders and activists were shopkeepers, teachers, construction workers, and (very often) well-networked informal economic sector actors, and this helped them recruit others. Unlike al Qaeda’s jihadi-salafists, who withdraw from their communities to wage jihad, the new movement has sought

24. See Aaron Zelin, “Maqdisi’s Disciples in Libya and Tunisia,” *Foreign Policy*, November 14, 2012, http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/11/14/maqdisi_s_disciples_in_libya_and_tunisia. See also Stefano M. Torelli, Fabio Merone, and Francesco Cavatorta, “Salafism in Tunisia: Challenges and Opportunities for Democratization,” *Middle East Policy* 19, no. 4 (2012): 140–54, <http://www.mepec.org/journal/middle-east-policy-archives/salafism-tunisia-challenges-and-opportunities-democratization>.

25. Social activism and charity have long been central to the Islamist project and to Islamism’s popularity. Islamist organizations across the Middle East and North Africa, whether primarily Sufi-oriented, salafi-oriented, or resistance-oriented, have successfully exploited the combination of militancy and social activity over many decades. Hamas, Hezbollah, and other organizations emerged in different contexts, but they also harnessed this combination successfully, in part due to weaker local political infrastructures in the Palestinian Territories and war-wracked Lebanon. In all cases local populations initially tolerate, participate in, and even come to depend on these social activities.

to wage jihad from within while remaining a part of society. This approach has given them the opportunity to directly interact with and potentially influence a much wider audience than al Qaeda and its affiliates ever could.

Even as scrutiny mounted, the leaders and guiding theorists of Ansar al Shari'a tried to avoid a confrontation with security forces and the state and preferred to take advantage of political openings to promote their cause. In November 2012 Tunisi declared that Tunisia was a "land of da'wa," or proselytization, not a "land of jihad."²⁶ He further explained that the revolutions had created new opportunities for da'wa and "more space to practice the rituals or religion and promote . . . virtue and prevent . . . vice."²⁷ Ansar al Shari'a and others who wanted to appeal to wider audiences argued that jihadi-salafists needed to build public support through charity and outreach before moving to open confrontation with the state. They sought to exploit political instability and freedom of expression to strengthen their numbers, influence, and capabilities. They would move from the da'wa phase to the confrontation phase once they had created a stronger base of popular support, fighters, training facilities, and weapons.²⁸

Meanwhile, jihadi-salafists operating on the Algerian border were stockpiling weapons and entrenching themselves in the Chaambi Mountains. They pursued a very different strategy,

26. "Abu Iyadh: Tunis laysat ardan lil-jihad" [Abu Iyadh: Tunisia is not a land of jihad], *Attunisia*, November 3, 2012, http://www.attounissia.com.tn/details_article.php?a=73547&t=41&lang=ar&temp=1.

27. The full quote reads: "Also the youth of Tunisia and others not to leave the arena for the secularists and others to spread corruption on earth, rather it is obligatory on who is capable of them to stay in his place, and make jihad against the enemy of Allah and his enemy by evidence and clarification. Especially since that is easy with the revolutions that had a good impact in changing the reality, and turning the balances, which gave—Alhamdulillah—a wide space of Dawah to Allah Almighty, and gave the committed Muslim more space to practice the rituals or religion and promote of virtue and prevent of vice." See AQIM, "An Appeal to the Youth of Islam Who Are Eager to Hijrah for the Sake of Allah in the Islamic Maghreb and Tunisia," Fursan al-Balagh Media, March 2013, https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2013/03/al-qc481_idah-in-the-islamic-maghrib-22call-to-the-youth-of-islam-to-those-who-aspire-to-hijrah-in-the-way-of-god-in-the-islamic-maghrib-in-general-and-tunisia-in-particular22-en.pdf.

28. This strategy is known as *tamkeen*, which means enabled or empowered.

one aimed at derailing Tunisia's fragile political transition by launching violent attacks and directly confronting security forces. Most of this activity was attributed to the Okba ibn Nafaa Brigade, which has ties to AQIM's northern emirate and includes both Tunisians and Algerians.²⁹ The group's attacks escalated from mine laying and ambushes to bolder attacks against security forces and specific targets. By mid-2013 the group had become a direct security challenge and was contributing to a growing sense of insecurity in the country. In July 2013, an attack in the Chaambi area killed eight soldiers—up to that point the largest loss of forces in a single attack—and violence continued escalating.³⁰ A year later, in July 2014, 14 soldiers were killed by gunmen at a checkpoint in the Chaambi area.³¹ The attacks created a wave of public sympathy for the security forces in some sectors of society and greater public tolerance for more aggressive counterterrorism operations. Some media outlets sought to portray the fallen soldiers as sons of Tunisia and media campaigns toward the end of 2013 helped raise money for the families of security personnel killed in the line of duty.³² This also contributed to growing opposition and frustration with the Ennahda-led government.

While rural violence and clashes with the Okba ibn Nafaa Brigade expanded in the west and north, urban violence by jihadi-salafists affiliated with Ansar al Shari'a also intensified. In September 2012 a mob of several hundred people attacked the U.S. embassy in Tunis and the nearby American School. Two

29. In 2006 a small group of armed Tunisians known as the Suleiman Group was allegedly trained by the Salafi Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), which became AQIM. The group infiltrated Tunisian territory with the alleged aim of conducting terrorist attacks.

30. Tarek Amara and Erika Solomon, "Gunmen Kill Eight Tunisian Troops as Political Tensions Rise," Reuters, July 29, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/07/29/us-tunisia-protests-idUSBRE96S12A20130729>.

31. Tarek Amara, "At Least 14 Tunisian Troops Killed in Mountain Attack," Reuters, July 17, 2014, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2014/07/17/uk-tunisia-violence-idUKK-BNoFL2V420140717>.

32. Nesma TV, for example, hosted telethons to raise money for families, and billboard ads were also used to create a sense of solidarity with the security forces.

rioters were killed in clashes with police.³³ The Tunisian government accused Ansar al Shari'a leaders of ordering the protests, though it is unclear to what extent the attack was directed by the group's leadership.³⁴ Then, in February 2013, opposition parliamentarian Chokri Belaid was gunned down outside his home. Tunisia's security environment was quickly deteriorating, and the assassination increased pressure on the Ennahda-led government to rein in extremism.

The political assassinations combined with rising attacks against security forces were a turning point. Ennahda's inclusive strategy had become a political liability, forcing it to shift its approach. The government replaced its polarizing Interior Minister Ali Laarayedh in February (though he later became prime minister) in an attempt to depoliticize the security response, and it moved more forcefully to evict jihadi-salafi preachers from mosques across the country. But it was only after a second political assassination—of opposition politician Mohammed Brahmi in July 2013—and the ensuing political crisis that the Ennahda-led government moved more forcefully to combat violent extremism. By then however, the political tide was already turning against Ennahda.³⁵

In mid-2013 Tunisian security forces launched intensive operations against militants around the Chaambi Mountains. While these efforts focused primarily on the Okba ibn Nafaa Brigade, the assaults thrust other Islamist groups, including Ansar al Shari'a, into the media spotlight, and Ansar al Shari'a was now marked as a primary target. Government forces clashed with

33. See Tarek Amara, "Two Dead as Protesters Attack U.S. Embassy in Tunisia," Reuters, September 14, 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/09/14/us-protests-tunisia-school-idUSBRE88D18020120914>.

34. The Tunisian government accused Abu Iyadh al-Tunsi of orchestrating the attacks. "Twenty Sentenced over US Embassy Attack in Tunis," *France24*, May 29, 2013, <http://www.france24.com/en/20130529-jail-sentenced-usa-embassy-attack-tunisia-islamists-film-salafists/>.

35. It is possible that even once Ennahda decided to confront violent extremists, its efforts were not accurately or fully reported on by the media. According to some sources, once Mehdi Jomaa's government took office in January 2014, the media began reporting on raids on safe houses and weapons caches on a regular basis.

Ansar al Shari'a activists, arresting several hundred of them; the government suppressed Ansar al Shari'a preaching events in many cities and banned the movement's annual conference, which undermined its ability to openly organize and recruit.³⁶ In August 2013 the Ennahda-led government declared it a terrorist group and accused it of links to the Okba ibn Nafaa Brigade and involvement in the assassinations of Belaid and Brahmi.³⁷

Though the terrorist designation was vague and initially not fully enforced, it signaled a shift toward treating both models of jihadi-salafism—that of Ansar al Shari'a and that of the Okba ibn Nafaa Brigade—as one threat. Whether this was by design or not, the government needed a clear address to explain the rising violence.

Despite the chain of events and Ansar al Shari'a's involvement in sporadic violence, it is unlikely that the movement was prepared to move to a phase of open confrontation with the state in 2013. Its experiment with using social and political activism to promote its da'wa remained undeveloped and untested. Even after Tunisi went underground and reportedly fled to Libya following the U.S. embassy attack, he called for restraint and exhorted both the Tunisian government and his youthful followers to avoid violence toward each other. In a pronouncement on August 5, 2013, he urged Tunisian authorities to “protect” salafi youth from presumably violent outcomes following the July assassination of Brahmi.³⁸ After a series of confrontations in

36. Mohammad Yassin al-Jalassi, “Is the End Coming for Ennahda’s Salafist Ties?” *Al Monitor*, May, 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/politics/2013/05/tunisia-salafist-ennahda-relations.html#>; “Tunisia Arrests 200 in Salafist Crackdown, Says PM,” *Al Arabiya*, May 20, 2013, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2013/05/20/Tunisia-arrests-200-in-Salafist-crackdown-says-PM.html>.

37. Tarek Amara, “Tunisia Blames ‘Terrorist’ Ansar al-Sharia for Killings,” Reuters, August 27, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/08/27/us-tunisia-crisis-ansar-idUSBRE97QoEW20130827>. See also “Tunisia: Branding Ansar Charia as Terrorist Organisation Based on Established Facts, Investigations—Interior Ministry,” *Tunis Afrique Presse*, August 28, 2013, <http://allafrica.com/stories/201308290732.html>.

38. See, for example, “Abou Ayadh appelle les sheikhs à soutenir les jeunes salafistes,” *MosaiqueFM*, August 8, 2013, <http://www.mosaiquefm.net/fr/index/a/Actu-Detail/Element/24610-abou-iyadh-appelle-les-cheikhs-a-soutenir-les-jeunes-salafistes>.

May 2013, other jihadi-salafists such as the Jordanian-born Mohammed al-Maqdisi also urged Ansar al Shari'a and salafi youth to be cautious of clashing with security forces. But increased security operations against Ansar al Shari'a likely pushed the group toward a premature transition from prioritizing da'wa activities to violently confronting the state. With public activities and organizing closed off due to pressure from security services, the group's committed activists had few options.

Since the crackdown, most Ansar al Shari'a activists have gone underground, and the government has increasingly sought to demonstrate that Ansar al Shari'a and the Okba ibn Nafaa Brigade are effectively the same organization. In early October 2014, for example, after arresting a group it accused of plotting major terrorist attacks in Tunisia in the lead-up to the parliamentary elections, the Tunisian Ministry of the Interior claimed to have found solid evidence of a close operational link between Okba ibn Nafaa and Ansar al Shari'a.³⁹ The actual extent of Ansar al Shari'a's relationship to Okba ibn Nafaa is difficult to ascertain. The murkiness of this relationship, coupled with the government's inability to crack down effectively on Okba ibn Nafaa, has encouraged the government to repress where it can, with Ansar al Shari'a feeling the brunt of this thrust.⁴⁰

39. "Cell Providing Logistical and Financial Support to Ansar Al-Sharia and 'Okba Ibn Nafaa' Brigade Dismantled," *Tunis Afrique Press*, October 14, 2014, <http://www.tap.info.tn/en/index.php/politics2/21755-cell-providing-logistical-and-financial-support-to-ansar-al-sharia-and-katiba-oqba-ibn-nafaa-dismantled>. The same day, the Ministry of the Interior stated that it had arrested a 20-year-old woman who admitted to working on propaganda and managing social media accounts for both groups and to being in direct contact with Abu Iyadh al-Tunsi. "Young Girl Led Propaganda Cell of Ansar Al-Sharia and Okba Ibn Nafaa Brigade," *Tunis Afrique Press*, October 14, 2014, <http://www.tap.info.tn/en/index.php/politics2/21756-young-girl-led-propaganda-cell-of-ansar-al-sharia-and-okba-ibn-nafaa-brigade>.

40. Although Ansar al Shari'a's activities in Tunisia may be largely constrained by the government crackdown, some scholars suggest that it is finding a new home in Libya, where Tunisi, the group's leader, is believed to be. Aaron Zelin has suggested that Ansar al Shari'a is rebranding itself as Shabab al-Tawhid (the Youth of Pure Monotheism). On March 4, 2014, Shabab al-Tawhid Media, a new online media outlet calling itself the "pulpit of the Sunni people in Tunisia," was established. Shabab al-Tawhid members in Libya are thought to be involved in operational activities, such as the kidnapping of Mohamed Bechikh, a Tunisian embassy

Since Ennahda stepped down in December 2013, the government's strategy to contain jihadi-salafism in urban centers has intensified. Persistent individual raids have been carried out against suspected terrorists, such as a raid on February 4, 2014, that killed seven militants, including Kamel Gadhgadhi, a primary suspect in the 2013 assassinations. These raids have allegedly thwarted several major terrorist attacks aimed at tourists in Tunisia; a raid on December 9, 2013, for example, revealed an alleged plot to carry out an attack on the island of Djerba, a popular European tourist destination,⁴¹ and several alleged plots in Tunis. More broadly, Interim Prime Minister Mehdi Jomaa's government prioritized security upon entering office. The government used the media more effectively to advertise its efforts, and the tension between the Ministry of the Interior and government that plagued Ennahda's tenure improved as Jomaa made personnel changes in the security arena. Moreover, greater cooperation with allied governments, including the United States and Algeria, has also given the government new tools in its fight against militants.⁴²

employee, in Libya on March 21. Following the kidnapping, Shabab al-Tawhid Media posted a video addressed to the Tunisian government demanding as ransom the release of Libyan militants captured in Tunisia in 2011. According to Zelin, the group's Facebook content shows its members in Tunisia engaged in a concerted effort to maintain Ansar al Shari'a networks in Tunisia even though the movement is now illegal: "The main purpose of this shift is to help adherents maintain solidarity and preserve their ability to organize and continue *dawa* work on a smaller scale." Aaron Y. Zelin, "Shabab al-Tawhid: The Rebranding of Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia?" Washington Institute for Near East Policy, May 9, 2014, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/shabab-al-tawhid-the-rebranding-of-ansar-al-sharia-in-tunisia>.

41. See Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, Bridget Moreng, and Kathleen Soucy, "Raising the Stakes: Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia's Shift to Jihad," ICCT Research Paper, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism—The Hague, February 2014, <http://www.icct.nl/download/file/ICCT-Gartenstein-Ross-Moreng-Soucy-Raising-the-Stakes-ASTs-Shift-to-Jihad-Feb-2014.pdf>.

42. The Tunisian government is allegedly creating the Technical Agency for Telecommunications, described by some as a unified professional spying service and centralized intelligence agency that will include mass monitoring of telecommunications and Internet traffic. See Tom Stevenson, "NSA-Style: Tunisia Setting Up Counterterrorism Unit That Will Also Spy on Citizens," *International Business Times*, February 26, 2014, <http://www.ibtimes.com/nsa-style-tunisia-setting-counterterrorism-unit-will-also-spy-citizens-1558013>.

Despite the crackdown and the government's more focused counterterrorism approach, violence in Tunisia has continued to surge. Between January and November of 2014, at least 35 Tunisian security personnel (soldiers or police) died in confrontations with militants, nearly double the number killed in 2013.⁴³ The first half of the year was marked by periodic confrontations between government forces and militants, mostly in the Chaambi region. Some attacks also occurred near Jendouba and Kasserine, including a May 27, 2014, attack on Interior Minister Lofti Ben Jeddou's home in Kasserine, which resulted in the deaths of four policemen.⁴⁴ Security personnel have been killed at roadblocks, as a result of landmine explosions, in operations to detain jihadi-salafists, and in ambushes by militants. The deadliest attack to date came on July 16, 2014, when 14 Tunisian soldiers were killed near Mount Chaambi in a militant attack for which the Okba ibn Nafaa Brigade claimed responsibility on social media platforms.⁴⁵

In response, the government formed a crisis group made up of representatives from the army, police, Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Religious Affairs.⁴⁶ This group suspended at least 157 civil associations with "alleged links to terrorism" in July 2014, and also shut down a TV channel, a radio station, and several websites accused of promoting violence. Twenty mosques were also shuttered for preaching a call to jihad. Specifically, the prime minister's office released a statement saying the mosques in question were not under control of the authorities and had celebrated the deaths of the soldiers. More than 60 Islamists

43. Compiled from various media reports.

44. "Four Policemen Killed in Attack on Tunisian Minister's Home," BBC, May 27, 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-27599299>.

45. Tarek Amara, "At Least 14 Tunisian Troops Killed in Mountain Attack," Reuters, July 17, 2014, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2014/07/17/uk-tunisia-violence-idUKK-BNoFLzV420140717>.

46. Bouazza Ben Bouazza and Paul Schemm, "Tunisia Crackdown Raises Fear of Rights Rollback," Associated Press, August 22, 2014, <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/tunisia-crackdown-raises-fears-rights-rollback>.

linked to the militants have been arrested since the attacks.⁴⁷ Other reports list up to 1,000 arrests.⁴⁸

Links among militant groups in Tunisia and across North Africa have only grown murkier. In January 2014 AQIM leader Abdelmalek Droukdal reportedly announced the creation of a new AQIM branch in Tunisia and Libya that would merge the Okba ibn Nafaa Brigade and Ansar al Shari'a. The new branch is reportedly headed by Khaled Chaieb (aka Lokman Abou Shagr).⁴⁹ After playing only a minor role in Tunisia throughout most of the last three years, AQIM is trying to assert itself and organize militant groups by reinforcing linkages among fighters in Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, and perhaps other neighboring countries. It is likely that some members of Ansar al Shari'a have joined the Okba ibn Nafaa Brigade or the new AQIM branch, but it is unclear whether the leadership of Ansar al Shari'a has made a formal decision to merge with these other groups. There are reports of an "Allegiance Act" between Tunisi and AQIM leader Abdelmalek Droukdal, but it is not clear whether this act constitutes an official *ba'ya*, or oath of allegiance (the Tunisian government claims that it does).

Further complicating the issue of links between different militant groups and the chain of command is the impact that the Islamic State's rebellion against al Qaeda has had on North African jihadi-salafists. According to some sources, the Okba ibn Nafaa Brigade has sworn allegiance to the Islamic State, though there is little evidence to substantiate this at the moment.⁵⁰ Given the Islamic State's growing appeal, such a move is possible. However, given the Islamic State's limited capabilities in

47. Tarek Amara, "Tunisia Orders Crackdown after Militants Kill 14 Soldiers," Reuters, July 19, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/07/20/us-tunisia-violence-idUSKBN0FO1o420140720>.

48. Ben Bouazza and Schemm, "Tunisia Crackdown Raises Fears."

49. On January 9, 2014, the Tunisian government announced that Chaieb was wanted for attacks against security forces.

50. See Adam al-Sabiri, "Is an 'Islamic State in the Maghreb' Following in the Footsteps of ISIS?" *Al-Akhhbar English*, October 23, 2014, <http://english.al-akhhbar.com/node/22161>. The article refers to a claim by a Tunisian Ministry of the Interior spokesman that "pro-ISIS elements in the Ansar al-Sharia group—in reference to the Uqba bin Nafi Brigade—had declared an emirate in southern Tunisia."

Tunisia and Algeria at the moment, any move by the Okba ibn Nafaa Brigade that cuts its ties with AQIM would likely undermine Tunisian jihadi-salafi capabilities and access to important networks in the short term. The return of Tunisians who fought with the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq could create more local networks sympathetic to the Islamic State. Tunisian security officials claim that 400 Tunisians have returned to date and that thousands have been prevented from leaving the country, though there is no clear data.⁵¹ The presence of so many Tunisian jihadi-salafists sympathetic to the Islamic State could eventually create a base for the movement's expansion in Tunisia.

THE IDEOLOGICAL BATTLE

While Tunisia's counterterrorism strategy evolved, there also emerged an ideological struggle to control the country's mosques and religious institutions and shape a new Islamic identity after half a century of state-imposed secularism. This ideological effort, which complemented the security response, sought to create an alternative to extremist discourse and ideology. For Ennahda, this meant attempting to redefine traditional Tunisian Islam and correcting the "historic mistake" (as political Islamists refer to it) of imposing secularization after independence.⁵² Promoting traditional Islam became a tool for constraining both nonviolent salafists who posed a political challenge (by pushing for more-conservative clauses in the constitution) and the jihadi-salafists who had become a security threat and a political liability.⁵³

51. Interview with Tunisian security official, November 24, 2014, Tunis.

52. Interestingly, Ennahda leader Rachid al-Ghannouchi rejects the notion of "traditional Tunisian Islam"; he has asserted that "Islam is one, the Qur'an and Sunna are one" and referred instead to "Tunisian Islamic culture." Interview with Rachid al-Ghannouchi, February 26, 2014, Washington, DC.

53. For a detailed analysis of Ennahda-salafi relations, see International Crisis Group, "Tunisia: Violence and the Salafi Challenge," Middle East/North Africa Report Number 137, Brussels, February 13, 2013, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/-/media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/North%20Africa/Tunisia/137-tunisia-violence-and-the-salafi-challenge.pdf>.

Rulers and governments have historically attempted to control and define religion as a way to bolster their own legitimacy and their citizens' obedience. By controlling the ulema and religious discourse, rulers in the Muslim world have attempted both to create a religious establishment that legitimizes political authority and to shape religious subjects who obey that authority. Across the Maghreb, the Maliki school of jurisprudence, one of Sunni Islam's four schools of law, plays an important role in government efforts to centralize religious authority.⁵⁴ Malikism accepts the importance of local social and political context. In practice this has meant that Maliki jurisprudence coexists with local cultural practices and traditions, most importantly Sufism.⁵⁵

The struggle to promote traditional Islam has a bureaucratic and institutional component as well as an ideological one. On the institutional level, when it led the government Ennahda moved to assert control over Tunisia's 5,000 mosques⁵⁶ and combat what the minister of religious affairs at the time described as "chaos in the mosques."⁵⁷ How many mosques were controlled by jihadi-salafists when the interim government took office in November 2011 is difficult to ascertain. Most government sources claim that at the time, nongovernment preachers controlled

54. Malikism is a school of law based on the teachings of Imam Malik bin Anas, who died at the end of the eighth century in Medina. Malikism prioritizes the Hadiths of the Medinan period and the "companions of the Prophet" over other parts of the Sunna. It also accepts that the context of time and place must be part of *ijtihad*, or the interpretation of issues not directly addressed in the Qur'an and Hadith; this position is not unique but is accepted in principle by other schools of law. See "Mālikiyya," *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., ed. P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C. E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, and W. P. Heinrichs, Brill Online, 2014, http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/malikiyya-COM_0652.

55. Sufism, including the folk practices of venerating saints and visiting tombs, is found throughout North Africa, though it was largely eradicated on the Arabian Peninsula in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by the followers of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, who considered the practice akin to polytheism.

56. In most Arab countries mosque preachers are appointed by the government and receive government salaries. Unofficial imams and preachers also exist primarily in unlicensed prayer and study meetings.

57. Interview with senior adviser to the minister of religious affairs, November 20, 2013, Tunis; and AFP, "Extremists Control Hundreds of Tunisia's Mosques: Religious Affairs Minister," *Al Arabiya*, March 31, 2012, <http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/03/31/204431.html>.

approximately one-fifth (nearly 1,000) of all mosques and that 1,000 new imams had appointed themselves.⁵⁸ A 2013 Reuters article cites a similar figure and claims that “radicals took over around 1,000 mosques,” but it fails to define “radical.” According to the Ennahda-affiliated minister of religious affairs at the time, salafists had taken over approximately 400 mosques, with 50 of those controlled by jihadi-salafists.⁵⁹ The actual numbers were likely higher, given that the government sought to downplay its lack of control.

Some of these new preachers had no formal religious training or credentials, and some espoused violence and jihadi-salafi ideology.⁶⁰ What is likely is that these mosques were taken over by a combination of salafists, jihadi-salafists, and nonaffiliated preachers or people who appointed themselves as preachers. As it sought to re-assert control, many of the preachers Ennahda installed in their stead were scripturalist salafi and conservative preachers loyal to Ennahda.⁶¹ According to one preacher who was critical of Ennahda, the movement used its power not only to root out jihadi-salafism, but more broadly to suppress any religious ideas that did not conform to its positions, including Sufism.⁶²

By early 2014 Ministry of the Interior officials claimed approximately 150 mosques remained under the control of ji-

58. According to a senior advisor to the minister of religious affairs, after the revolution many mosque preachers appointed by the old regime were either evicted from their communities or dismissed, though some were reappointed, and over 1,000 imams appointed themselves to positions within mosques. Interview with advisor to the minister of religious affairs, November 20, 2013, Tunis.

59. Tom Heneghan, “Ambiguous Religion Policy Backfires on Tunisia’s Ruling Islamists,” Reuters, September 3, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/09/03/us-tunisia-crisis-religion-idUSBRE9820C920130903>.

60. According to one report in the London-based pan-Arab daily *Al Hayat*, a taxi driver became the imam of a local mosque in the Monastir governorate and began recruiting youth to fight in Syria. See Hazim al-Amin, “Tunisia: The Road to Jihad in Syria Paved by the Muslim Brotherhood and Jihadist-Salafism,” October 18, 2013, accessed from *BBC Worldwide Monitoring*.

61. International Crisis Group, “Tunisia: Violence and the Salafi Challenge.”

62. Interview with Sufi imam, November 22, 2013, Tunis. The imam claimed that he had been removed from his mosque position after criticizing the Ennahda government, and was given 24-hour police protection after receiving multiple death threats.

hadi-salafists.⁶³ Despite government efforts, asserting control will remain an ongoing challenge. Mosque preachers or Friday prayer leaders are only the most visible manifestation of influence in mosques, and there are certainly more mosques where jihadi-salafists give classes or lead prayers informally than those where they preach or lead Friday prayers, though exactly how many is unknown. Tunisia, like every country, also has private, unlicensed mosques, where the Ministry of Religious Affairs has no oversight of preaching and education.

As a result, exerting central control over Tunisia's mosques—both as a way to influence religious values and explicitly to counter jihadi-salafi ideology—has taken on increased significance.⁶⁴ As it cracked down on jihadi-salafi activity, Ennahda realized it needed to reestablish centralized control over the appointment of preachers and over the messages they disseminated, primarily during classes and Friday communal prayers. The Ministry of Religious Affairs appointed a commission to address the issue and used a combination of police, legal, and bureaucratic actions to reassert authority. The day-to-day efforts to reshape the religious landscape unfolded primarily within the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Ministry of Higher Education.⁶⁵

Tunisia's most prized religious institution, the Zaytouna Mosque, is at the center of this struggle. Though Zaytouna has been stripped of its religious authority, it remains a national symbol, and it has strong brand appeal, even among secular Tunisians. While there is a broad consensus across the religious spectrum that Zaytouna should be revived as part of the effort

63. Interview with senior Tunisian security official, April 2, 2014, Washington, DC; and Sana BenAbda, "Tunisia: 149 mosques under the control of radical salafists," *The Tunis Times*, March 14, 2014, <http://www.thetunistimes.com/2014/03/tunisia-149-mosques-under-the-control-of-radical-salafists-51526/>.

64. Interview with adviser to minister of religious affairs, November 20, 2013, Tunis.

65. The Ministry of Religious Affairs is responsible for appointing mosque imams or prayer leaders, monitoring the messages preached in mosques, and approving the criteria for qualifying religious scholars and imams, while the Ministry of Higher Education oversees the religious studies department at the University of Tunis.

to counter violent extremism, few agree on the roles Zaytouna should assume or the curriculum it should teach. A key question dividing Tunisians is whether Zaytouna should remain solely a mosque or should resume its function as a university. Many political Islamists affiliated with Ennahda and more conservative elements within Tunisian society wish to revive Zaytouna as a mosque-university that awards degrees. Some religious scholars who were appointed under the Ennahda government have proposed that the Zaytouna Mosque focus on religious and theological sciences as well as *da'wa*.⁶⁶ Because under Bourguiba and Ben Ali religion was an academic subject taught only in universities, restoring Zaytouna's status as a university—and thereby restoring Islamic study in Tunisia to a religious framework—would symbolize the rejection of the secularization carried out under Bourguiba.

Many secular-minded Tunisians as well as devout Tunisians who want to separate religion from politics fear that reviving Zaytouna as a university could create an education system parallel to the secular one, which would be shaped and politicized by more conservative religious scholars. The imam of the Zaytouna Mosque, Sheikh Hussein Obeidi, has in the past expressed intolerant views and incited violence, though he has kept his post.⁶⁷ Disputes over control of Zaytouna, its function, and its outlook will remain a source of tension among a range of religious and political actors for the foreseeable future. The stakes of this struggle are high. Given Zaytouna's historical importance in Tunisian national identity, whoever controls the religious out-

66. Interview with researcher at the Islamic Studies Center of Kairouan, November 20, 2013. The center is loosely affiliated with the religious studies department at the University of Tunis.

67. Sheikh Obeidi reportedly issued a fatwa arguing that a group of artists exhibiting what he deemed sacrilegious art were infidels and could be killed according to Islamic law. In June 2012 the exhibit, entitled "The Art Spring," sparked two days of riots in Tunis that led to at least one death and over 160 arrests. See Tarek Amara and Lin Noueihed, "Tunisian Salafi Islamists Riot Over 'Insulting' Art," Reuters, June 12, 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/06/12/us-tunisia-salafis-clash-idUSBRE85BoXW20120612>.

look and doctrine of Zaytouna will have considerable influence in shaping religious values across the country.⁶⁸

Though Ennahda led the struggle to define traditional Tunisian Islam while it headed the government, the issue transcends any single political or religious movement. A variety of political and religious actors increasingly see Tunisian Islamic traditions, which draw on the country's rich history and religious legacy, as integral to combatting extremist ideology. In interviews, a wide range of religious and political actors—including political Islamists and Ennahda leaders,⁶⁹ state-employed imams,⁷⁰ and Sufis—all affirmed the importance of reviving Tunisian Islam to combat extremism. Even some salafi leaders sympathetic to jihadi-salafists speak of reviving Tunisian Islam to counter extremism, yet their definition of extremism and traditional Islam is less clear.⁷¹ This debate is being carried out among religious scholars and political leaders, but it will shape the religious values that are taught and promoted in Tunisia's schools and mosques for the next generation.

CHALLENGES OF CREATING NATIONAL ISLAMIC IDENTITY

The struggle to redefine traditional Tunisian Islam remains highly politicized and will likely be contested by a range of actors for the foreseeable future. Competition between Ennahda,

68. Reviving Zaytouna's educational role could give the ulema overseeing the Zaytouna Mosque considerable influence over the religious sphere, since it would involve them in controlling a nationwide network of charities, associations, mosques, and preachers. Before independence, Zaytouna had branches across Tunisia, and reopening those branches would give religious scholars more outlets for promoting religious education throughout the country.

69. Interview with Said Ferjani, member of Ennahda political bureau, November 18, 2013, Tunis.

70. Interview with Taieb Ghozi, Friday imam at Okba ibn Nafaa Mosque, November 20, 2013, Kairouan.

71. According to Adel al-Ilmi, the head of a conservative salafi group originally named the Group for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, all four *madhhabs* are correct but only the Maliki *madhhab* should be taught. Interview with Adel al-Ilmi, November 19, 2013, Tunis. Critics of Tunisian salafists, however, argue that salafists merely talk about promoting the Maliki *madhhab* for fear of alienating more traditional Muslims.

the new government, secular political forces, and salafists means that no single actor can determine religious policy and the messages that are propagated. Despite its election defeat, Ennahda will remain an important political force in Tunisia, but its ability to independently guide religious policy will be constrained by the new government.

Several challenges loom ahead. For one, the specific ideological character of traditional Islam remains murky. However effective the government may be in controlling mosques and physical space, shaping ideology is more complicated. The credibility of state religious institutions has eroded over time, in part because their leaders are often reluctant to address challenges of daily life that are inherently political: poor governance, economic exclusion, and corruption. By steering to safe topics, state clerics undermine their credibility with young people, who are looking for more open discourse, particularly in the post-Arab uprising political environment.

Part of the problem is also a generation gap and communication gap between the older ulema and young people. These gaps are not a problem for jihadi-salafi preachers, on the other hand, who appeal to disenfranchised youth looking for order and meaning in their lives. They preach about injustice, humiliation, and inequality, and they provide means for young people to take action. They understand what motivates young people and focus on education and social work, which is empowering for many young people who feel marginalized.

A younger generation of scholars and thinkers in the region understands that combatting violent religious discourse requires addressing the needs of the young. Imams must be able to talk to younger generations, understand their needs, and have the tools and skills necessary to fulfill those needs. But training such imams will be a long-term process.

Marketing and messaging are also important components of spreading non-violent traditional Islamic values. Governments in the region, including Tunisia, have increased state-run religious television and radio programming to compete with

preachers from the Gulf and Egypt found on satellite television. The challenge is that state-run television is generally dull compared to the more fiery programming available on the Internet or by satellite. State ulema seek to inculcate respect for authority, but that message is largely out of step with the mood of North Africa, where society and politics have been permeated with the rebelliousness of the Arab uprisings.

Most importantly, these issues raise the question of whether a secular government, and one headed by a political party (Nidaa Tounes) committed to state secularism and led by many individuals affiliated with the previous regime, can successfully control the state religious bureaucracy and create a legitimate and authoritative religious identity and discourse which satisfies the needs of the majority of Tunisians. Election results in October 2014, which gave Ennahda nearly 30 percent of the Parliament, illustrate that a sizeable minority of Tunisians seek a public role for religion. Tunisia's history demonstrates that repressing nonviolent religious discourse, or failing to create a discourse that resonates with young people in particular, ensures that extremist voices will fill the void. Can Ennahda serve as a bridge between the new government and the religious establishment, or will political competition complicate state-religious interaction? How the new government moves forward in shaping its religious policy including education and asserting control over the religious bureaucracy and whether it can work with a wide spectrum of nonviolent Islamist voices, including Ennahda, will determine whether defining a new religious identity becomes a source of strength for Tunisians or further divides them.

LOOKING FORWARD

Despite rising violence, Tunisia's two-pronged effort to combat extremist violence and ideology prevented further destabilization at a time of heightened political uncertainty and regional turmoil. Yet extremism will continue posing a challenge. Ongoing violence and state failure make neighboring Libya a sanctuary for Tunisian and other jihadi-salafists who seek to launch

attacks inside the country.⁷² Moreover, the ongoing war in Syria and Iraq creates a steady stream of jihadi-salafi propaganda. As of November 2014 an estimated 3,000 Tunisians have gone to fight with al Qaeda-linked groups as well as the Islamic State, making Tunisians one of the largest foreign national groups fighting in Syria. Hundreds are reportedly returning home.

Many of the broader developments shaping the jihadi-salafi landscape across the region, including the Islamic State rebellion and jihad in Syria, cannot be addressed by Tunisia's government alone. But the government can influence several factors that will shape the country's future stability.

First, if security forces excessively harass or abuse Islamists or salafists, it could deepen sympathy for jihadi-salafists, especially in poorer urban areas where salafists and jihadi-salafists are part of the communal framework. Past repression has tended to strengthen Islamist groups' appeal, and renewed government harassment could encourage more young people to embrace violence. Since the beginning of 2014 Tunisia's security forces have intensified their operations and cast a wide net against potential extremists. More than 150 organizations and associations have been shut down for alleged links to terrorism, and over 1,500 people have been arrested.⁷³ Under the draft terrorism law that the new parliament will continue debating, civil society organizations may be subject to persecution for broadly defined terrorist acts. Abuses and mistakes by security forces have also prompted anger. In September, forces in Kasserine accidentally shot two young women driving by a checkpoint.⁷⁴ In

72. According to some reports, Tunisian security forces have begun arresting smugglers believed to be trafficking fighters from Tunisia to Libya. See "Tunisia Detains Six Traffickers," *Magharebia*, October 7, 2014, http://magharebia.com/en_GB/articles/awi/newsbriefs/general/2014/10/07/newsbrief-01.

73. Human Rights Watch, "Tunisia: Suspension of Associations Arbitrary," August 13, 2014, <http://www.hrw.org/news/2014/08/13/tunisia-suspension-associations-arbitrary>; Tarek Amara, "Tunisia cracks down on jihadists as elections loom: PM," Reuters, October 11, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/10/11/us-tunisia-security-idUSKCN0l00F120141011>.

74. Human Rights Watch, "Tunisia: Investigate Fatal Police Shooting," September 3, 2014, <http://www.hrw.org/news/2014/09/03/tunisia-investigate-fatal-police-shooting>.

October, local police allegedly tortured and murdered a young man from Tunis, reviving accusations that the government has not reformed the security sector or addressed the other grievances against state abuses of power that helped fuel the 2011 uprising.⁷⁵

Second, how the government integrates returning fighters will have an impact on jihadi networks in the prison system and in the general population. If returning fighters or others who support jihad in Syria are treated simply as criminals to be prosecuted rather than rehabilitated, they are more likely to form a future threat. Those who return from Syria genuinely disillusioned by the jihadi project should be rehabilitated, but determining which returnees are redeemable and which mean to cause more harm will require careful government investigation. Lumping all returnees in one basket and punishing them will likely create more extremists. As of late 2014 the government had not articulated a plan for addressing the threat of returnees from jihad in Syria and Iraq.

Third, the ability of the existing political framework to incentivize political compromise and competition and make space for legitimate opposition including political Islamists is crucial. There should be some political space for nonviolent salafists as well as more conservative elements of Ennahda who may distance themselves from the movement, whether they choose to participate in formal politics or not. As the new government regulates religious space, it must strike a balance between promoting its own values and repressing other nonviolent interpretations. Salafism has existed in some form in the Maghreb for centuries, and it is likely to remain a social, religious, and (potentially) political force. The challenge is to provide enough space for nonviolent salafists to remain part of the system rather than adopting violence as a tool and strategy.

Fourth, it will matter whether Tunisia's state religious leadership can rebuild the credibility of the country's traditional reli-

75. Human Rights Watch, "Tunisia: Suspicious Death in Custody," October 13, 2014, <http://www.hrw.org/news/2014/10/13/tunisia-suspicious-death-custody-o>.

gious institutions and values in a way that resonates with young people and that depoliticizes religion. The new constitution addresses only broadly the role of religion in society. It cannot resolve complicated ideological and institutional divisions that will shape the future religious landscape. That task will be left to competing religious and political actors. How the new government approaches the religious establishment as well as Ennahda, which has religious objectives, and whether these groups can reach a consensus on a new Tunisian Islamic identity will have far-reaching implications for the country's future stability.

While Tunisia has a long history as a center of Islam, its modern history has been one of repression of Islam as a social and political force. Now Tunisia faces the difficult process of confronting violent extremism while moving away from the repression of the past—all in an environment where violence could easily destabilize the road ahead. As it navigates forward, it must balance between these competing historical tendencies. Tunisia has come a long way in a short period of time and despite its many challenges holds the promise of greater stability, representative government, and personal freedoms. As it moves forward in fighting extremism and finding an appropriate role for religion in public life, Tunisia can draw on its past religious traditions and a new appreciation for political compromise. The path forward will not be easy. But in order to succeed Tunisians must embrace both.