

TUNISIA: SEARCHING FOR A POSTREVOLUTIONARY RELIGIOUS EQUILIBRIUM

Haim Malka

Zaytouna Mosque sits in the heart of Tunis's old walled city. For centuries, Zaytouna was more than a place of worship, it was one of the most important universities in the Mediterranean world. It produced famed scholars, trained generations of government bureaucrats, and oversaw educational branches across the country. Zaytouna represented a distinctly Tunisian religious-cultural heritage that many Tunisians have described as "traditional Tunisian Islam," or simply "Zaytouni."¹ It was open to the cultural influences of its milieu at the crossroads of Africa, the Middle East, and Europe while promoting orthodox Sunni jurisprudence.²

Throughout Tunisia's history, Zaytouna was at the forefront of the country's intellectual debates. As Tunisia's nationalist movement evolved in the 1930s, Zaytouna was "active in redefining the position of Islam in public life in a changing Tunisia."³ Zaytouna's centrality changed dramatically after independence in 1956. Within a decade, Habib Bourguiba, Tunisia's first president, who envisioned

1. For a discussion of "Traditional Tunisian Islam" and identity see Haim Malka, "The Struggle for Religious Identity in Tunisia and the Maghreb," CSIS, May 2, 2014, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/struggle-religious-identity-tunisia-and-maghreb>.

2. Zaytouna also played an important role in transferring advanced scientific knowledge to Europe during the medieval period.

3. Teije Hidde Donker and Kasper Ly Netterstrom, "The Tunisian Revolution and Governance of Religion," *Middle East Critique* 26, no. 2 (2017): 140.

a secular republic, dismantled Zaytouna's educational units, nationalized Islamic endowments and property used to support the ulema, co-opted the ulema, and took numerous steps to secure state control over religious institutions and discourse.

Bourguiba wanted to ensure that the state, not independent institutions, controlled religious affairs and defined the balance between Islam and public space in the newly independent state.⁴ In the ensuing years, the state security apparatus closely monitored and controlled religious activities and worship. The result was that Zaytouna, which had historically represented Tunisia's identity as both religious and modern, became completely marginalized. The former equilibrium between religion and state was replaced with state repression of religion and an effort to impose a secular identity on Tunisians.

A half-century later, in the aftermath of Tunisia's 2011 revolution, Zaytouna has emerged as a battleground between Tunisians who believe Islam should influence public affairs in some way and Tunisians who want to maintain a sharper boundary between religion and public space. The struggle is consequential; whoever controls Zaytouna has the potential to influence religious discourse across the country. Debates over Zaytouna's role, responsibilities, and mandate are a bellwether for broader debates over religion in Tunisia. Rather than a binary political struggle between Islamists and secularists, the debate over religion in postauthoritarian Tunisia reflects the challenges and complexities of shifting political alliances, bureaucratic turnover, and a mix of political compromise and deadlock that have prevented the country from reaching consensus on critical policy issues. So far, those who favor a constrained role for Zaytouna and strict state oversight of religious affairs have an edge. But the struggle to define a uniquely Tunisian balance between Islam and public affairs will endure for the foreseeable future.

The political struggle to find a new equilibrium is critical because state policies of forcefully and thoroughly excluding religion from public space have had far-reaching negative consequences for post-revolutionary Tunisia. First, it delegitimized state-affiliated preachers

4. *Ibid.*, 141.

and scholars who are seen as tools of the state. Second, by weakening the religious establishment it created a vacuum that was filled, in part, by violent salafi groups linked to al Qaeda and later the Islamic State group (ISG). Third, it exposed a deep national identity crisis over Islam that had been largely dormant but that rose to the surface as a divisive political issue.

Regulating religious space is important. Yet, Tunisia's modern history shows that efforts to regulate religious affairs in the name of imposing a rigid sense of national identity has not only failed but has had serious repercussions. In the process, marginalizing Zaytouna—an institution that has represented a balance between Tunisia's traditional and modern identities—has left postauthoritarian Tunisia unprepared to address a range of social, political, and security challenges facing the country, including violent extremism. Without reaching a new balance on the role of religion in public affairs through dialogue, Islam will continue to be a source of conflict and be manipulated for political objectives. Finding this balance will require compromise on all sides and a partnership between the government, political parties, and civil society. The challenge for Tunisians is to reach this balance in a way that overcomes deep political polarization and respects Tunisia's newly achieved freedom of expression.

POSTINDEPENDENCE IDENTITY CRISIS

Despite state efforts to impose secularism since independence, Tunisia remains a socially conservative country. Islam is a strong cultural force and it is the only common denominator among multiple, historical sources of identity that binds all Tunisians together.⁵ The country's 1959 constitution explicitly recognizes Islam as the country's religion.⁶

5. Tunisia's Jewish population has lived in the country since Roman times. During the French colonial period (1881–1956), Tunisia's Jewish population peaked at more than 100,000 people. The number has dwindled to approximately 1,500 who live primarily in Tunis, the Island of Djerba, and the southeastern coastal town of Zarzis.

6. Article One of Tunisia's 1959 constitution states, "Tunisia is a free, independent, and sovereign state, Islam is its religion, Arabic is its language, and the republic is

Despite Islam's cultural depth in the country, Tunisia's postindependence rulers viewed religion as a threat not only to modernization but to their monopoly on power. For Habib Bourguiba, Islam contradicted his definition of modernity and development. He once infamously drank orange juice on television during the fasting month of Ramadan, arguing that fasting for an entire month undermined worker productivity. Moreover, he feared that religious and other nonstate institutions would undermine the state's authority. Part of his modernization effort included improving women's rights and access to education through a new personal status code that stunned the Arab-Muslim world at the time for challenging the region's cultural consensus.⁷

As scholars have noted, Bourguiba attempted to secularize Tunisia "via an aggressive state-imposed political project associated with the marginalization of Tunisia's history and Islamic traditions."⁸ His administration neutralized the scholars of Zaytouna by nationalizing and confiscating the endowments (*habous*) and property that Zaytouna controlled across the country.⁹ By depriving Zaytouna of its independent income sources, Bourguiba ensured that the religious class would be dependent on the state for salaries and thus refrain from political activity. Over time, this co-optation became so extensive that religious discourse and physical space became tightly controlled by the state, undermining the credibility of the ulema. Mosques were only open during prayer times, libraries were emptied of most religious texts, and Islamic education was reduced to emphasize ritual. Bourguiba essentially divided the

its system [of government]." World Intellectual Property Organization, accessed June 18, 2019, <https://wipolex.wipo.int/ar/text/196736>.

7. The personal status code was decreed in 1956 and entered law in January 1957. It gave women the right to vote and initiate divorce, in addition to other rights. Legislation aimed at promoting equality between women and men and legal protections for women remain more advanced in Tunisia than any other Arab country in the Middle East and North Africa.

8. Zeineb Ben Yahmed and Sarah Yerkes, "God or Man in Tunisia," Carnegie Middle East Center, August 29, 2018, <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/77113>.

9. Religious endowments are referred to as *awqaf* in other parts of the Middle East. They are typically parcels of land, apartments, shops, or other property that generate revenue that is used to benefit a mosque, charity, or other social services.

Zaytouna mosque-university through a series of reforms. The historic mosque in Tunis would serve only as a place of worship. Its school was incorporated into academic departments at the University of Tunis, including the Higher Institute of Theology, the Higher Institute of Islamic Civilization, and the Center for Islamic Studies.¹⁰

Meanwhile, religious institutions were carefully monitored by the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Ministry of Interior. This heavy regulation served several objectives. First, it sought to control mosque discourse and imam sermons in a way that prevented imams from addressing controversial or political subjects. Second, it sought to prevent religious authorities from consolidating power and influence outside of the state bureaucracy. Third, it sought to ensure that the moral authority and legitimacy of religious institutions were enlisted to serve the state and sanction government policies. Fourth, it prevented religious actors from using their position for political activity or allowing religiously inspired political opposition groups to challenge the state's monopoly on decision-making. The result of these efforts was a religious establishment that was so closely affiliated with the state that it had little moral authority or legitimacy.

Islamism was becoming a powerful opposition force in the Middle East and North Africa when President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali replaced Bourguiba in 1987. Al Qaeda was emerging in Afghanistan; the tumult of the first Gulf War (1990–1991) sparked protests across the region; and a civil war between the military and Islamists raged in neighboring Algeria (1992–1999). Ben Ali saw threats everywhere, and his police state stifled all political opposition and pursued aggressive counterterrorism policies that prosecuted both violent and nonviolent Islamists alike.

Most political Islamic activists were either jailed or exiled. Despite these restrictions, Islam continued to inspire people and Islamic identity evolved under the surface. Because mosque discourse was so tightly controlled and preachers had to avoid controversial

10. "Certificates offered," Ez-Zitouna University, June 19, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2N8aq2e>.

topics, many people, most importantly young people, stopped listening. But the demand for information on religious topics and religious commentary on political and social issues persisted within society. Gulf preachers spreading Wahhabi teachings influenced people through satellite television and Gulf money was supporting quietist salafi organizations active in *da'wa* (spiritual outreach) and proselytizing. Ben Ali's ties with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Cooperation Council countries that shared overlapping security and counterterrorism interests facilitated growing Gulf influence in religious space. State authorities either did not realize the extent of the vacuum they were creating or did not sufficiently assess the threat of salafi and jihadi-salafi ideology that was brewing in the country.¹¹

Widespread grievances that fuel radicalization—including socioeconomic and political marginalization, harassment by the security forces, and perceptions of injustice—intensified. The 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq further radicalized hundreds of young Tunisians who migrated to join the ranks of the al Qaeda insurgency in Iraq, oftentimes with the acquiescence of Tunisian authorities who were eager to get rid of these radicalized individuals. The Ben Ali regime attempted to contain all these disparate elements through aggressive security operations and legal restrictions. Rather than quell extremism, however, Ben Ali's tactics—both in suppressing legitimate political expression and nonstate-sanctioned religious movements—created a religious vacuum and fueled radicalization among Tunisian youth.

Postrevolutionary Tunisia

Tunisia's political-religious environment changed dramatically after the protests in December 2010 sparked revolution. Far from the one-party system that had existed before, Tunisia's revolution created unprecedented opportunities for political parties, associations, and organizations of all types to emerge and operate. These groups comprised a diverse range of religious movements and

11. Interview with former senior Ben Ali regime official, Tunis, May 12, 2016.

organizations, including nonviolent political parties like Ennahda, quietest salafi organizations like Hizb al-Tahrir, numerous associations and NGOs like the salafi Group for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, and violent jihadi-salafi organizations like Ansar al-Sharia. All these groups were allowed to operate relatively openly during the two years following the revolution, and the ensuing changes reshaped the religious landscape.

First, Islamist political parties were legalized, allowed to organize, recruit, and participate in the country's elections for the National Constituent Assembly following the revolution.¹² Previously exiled religious and political leaders returned to the country, and those imprisoned were released. After being repressed for more than a half century, these groups not only became visible and operated openly but became part of the debate on public affairs.

Second, in an environment of newly achieved freedom of speech, Tunisia's first postrevolutionary governments were unsure how to address growing vigilante violence perpetrated by salafists, which contributed to a chaotic postrevolutionary social-political environment. At the same time, a government amnesty released hundreds of prisoners, including up to 250 jihadi-salafists. These activists were able to revive militant recruiting and operational networks in Tunisia and abroad, while amassing followers and recruiting several thousand young Tunisians to join the ranks of the ISG in Syria and Libya.¹³ Eventually, jihadi-salafists launched a terrorism campaign against civilians and the state.

Third, autonomous preachers, some of whom advocated violence, took over up to 20 percent of Tunisia's 5,000 mosques, creating a situation where extremist discourse was unchecked.¹⁴

12. Tunisia's National Constituent Assembly was dissolved in October 2014 and was replaced by the Assembly of the Representatives of the People.

13. For an in-depth look at Tunisian foreign fighters, see Haim Malka and Margo Balboni, "Tunisia: Radicalism Abroad and at Home," CSIS, June 2016, <http://foreignfighters.csis.org/tunisia/why-tunisia.html>.

14. Interview with Mounir Tlili, Tunis, September 3, 2015. Some officials claimed it was much higher. In an interview with the author, Tlili claimed that almost one-third of mosques had been taken over by salafists.

Fourth, the revolution reignited a debate over Tunisian identity and the role of Islam in public life, which became one source of political contestation.

The reemergence of Islamic-inspired political parties and organizations created deep concern among members of Tunisia's political, economic, and social elite. Coastal elites that benefited from previous authoritarian regimes clung to the idea of a European-oriented secular Tunisia; many felt that after the revolution they woke up to a country that they didn't recognize and that had become more socially conservative and religious. This gap was partially a result of socioeconomic class divisions and regional differences, as well as tension between old and new elites. New elites included former dissidents who went from political exile or prison to senior positions in the government.

Political tension deepened as Ennahda, the most effectively organized political party, won the largest share of votes in the country's first free elections for the constituent assembly in 2011 and formed a coalition government known as the Troika (December 2011–January 2014).¹⁵ New debates and political conflicts emerged over legislation and senior appointments in the religious sphere. Ennahda lost many of these legislative battles, including efforts to legalize religious endowments, restore Zaytouna's education system,¹⁶ and prevent constitutional language asserting the equality of men and women.¹⁷

15. Ennahda won 89 of 217 seats. The Troika government from December 2011 to January 2014 was a coalition led by Ennahda that included the Congress for the Republic Party (CPR) and the Ettakatol party.

16. The fear of those Tunisians who want to maintain Zaytouna solely as a mosque is that creating an educational function for mosques would establish a parallel educational system that could be politicized by religious activists.

17. Ennahda insisted that men and women are "complementary," not "equal." They compromised on the final language in the constitution, which states in Article 21, "All citizens, male and female, have equal rights and duties, and are equal before the law without any discrimination." For an English translation of Tunisia's constitution, see https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Tunisia_2014.pdf.

ENNAHDA'S VISION

Ennahda has emerged as the most organized and articulate political force in postauthoritarian Tunisia.¹⁸ It is also the only political party that articulates a strategy for regulating religious space and strengthening the role of Islam in society. At the center of Ennahda's strategy is the idea of reviving what some of its senior leaders refer to as "traditional Tunisian Islam."¹⁹

In the words of Ennahda leader Rached Ghannouchi, the movement set out to "correct the historic mistake" of Bourguiba's state-imposed secularization.²⁰ Ennahda argues that restoring the credibility of religious leaders and teaching Tunisians about their faith would revive a more tolerant version of Islam that would help defeat radicalism. Ennahda leaders and imams affiliated with the movement speak of reviving Zaytouna, promoting the Maliki *madhhab*, and teaching "moderate and correct Islamic values." This definition of "moderate" includes "accepting the other" and "rules of dialogue, accepting different viewpoints, and respect."²¹ Some critics of Ennahda charge that their emphasis on "moderate Islam" is a public relations effort targeted at Western governments. Others argue that Ennahda instructs preachers to talk about Malikism and wear tra-

18. Harakat Ennahda (the "Renaissance Movement") grew out of opposition to former president Habib Bourguiba's secularizing reforms. Rached Ghannouchi, an intellectual, founded the Mouvement de la Tendence Islamique (MTI) in 1981 as an independent social and political movement inspired by Muslim Brotherhood groups in other Arab countries. Bourguiba repressed the movement, which changed its name to Ennahda and sought to participate in formal politics during the brief liberalization that occurred after Ben Ali came to power in 1987. The opening swiftly closed as Ben Ali banned the movement, pursued an aggressive counterterrorism strategy, and consolidated power. Ghannouchi lived in exile from 1988 to 2011. After Ben Ali fled the country, Ghannouchi returned to Tunisia and Ennahda formed a political party.

19. Interview with Rached Ghannouchi, Washington, DC, February 26, 2014. Ghannouchi dismissed this notion of a "Tunisian Islam," stating in an interview with the author that "Islam is one, the Qur'an and the Sunnah are one," and referred instead to "Tunisian Islamic culture."

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid.

ditional Tunisian dress only in order to appeal to the local population, while indirectly spreading salafi doctrine.²²

Ennahda, however, has never been an ideologically monolithic movement. Some leaders and adherents practice Sufism, while others adhere more closely to salafism.²³ There is significant internal debate within the movement between these different factions. Rached Ghannouchi has worked to bridge these different currents in order to maintain a unified movement. Many Ennahda supporters who favored using the party's newfound political power to impose conservative legislation were deeply disappointed by the cautious approach favored by Ghannouchi.

For example, during debates over drafting the new constitution, Ennahda members on the preamble committee advocated explicit language about Islam's centrality, which led to deep arguments with more secular committee members. Ennahda, at the behest of Ghannouchi, eventually agreed to compromise, resulting in constitutional language concerning Islam that mirrored the previous constitution, which stated in Article I, "Tunisia is a free, independent, sovereign state; Islam is its religion, Arabic is its language, and the republic is its system [of government]."²⁴

Ennahda's efforts to reshape the religious landscape have been limited by several factors. It has been in awkward positions of serving in coalition governments while simultaneously acting as an opposition to the old guard political elite that still wields power, especially in the bureaucracy. This has limited its ability to shape policy and reorganize ministries.

In early 2014, Ennahda resigned from the government and turned over control to a technocratic government in response to a spiraling political conflict. Then in mid-2016, it reached a compromise

22. Interview with Sufi imam, Tunis, November 22, 2013. The imam had been removed from his mosque after criticizing the Ennahda party and had 24-hour police protection during the time of the interview, after receiving multiple death threats.

23. Habib Ellouz, for example, was elected to parliament in 2011 with the Ennahda Party.

24. The Constitution of the Tunisian Republic, January 26, 2014, https://majles.marsad.tn/uploads/documents/TnConstit_final_1.pdf.

agreement with Nidaa Tounes to share power, though it maintained a junior role in the cabinet. Ennahda's greatest fear is a return to authoritarianism that would resume repressive tactics against the movement. Most of Ennahda's leaders were either in prison or exiled following the Ben Ali regime's outlawing of the party in 1988, and their families were subject to harassment by the security services.²⁵ Thus, Ennahda's political strategy has focused on supporting government accountability and transparency to protect rights of association and speech.

In addition to compromising on the constitution and legislation, many of Ennahda's more conservative figures who were elected to parliament in 2011 were pushed out of the political party and given posts in Islamic NGOs affiliated with Ennahda. Other public figures who were not officially part of Ennahda but had served in the government bureaucracy after 2011 were also encouraged to find other nonofficial positions in religious NGOs. One controversial figure, Habib Ellouz, a salafi-leaning member of Ennahda's consultative body who served one term in parliament, became the president of the Association of Preaching and Reform, an organization that he has used to promote a conservative-religious agenda.²⁶

In May 2016, Ennahda announced that it was separating its political activities and social/spiritual outreach activities, a move that it had been preparing for several years.²⁷ This decision essentially created an important role for NGOs and civil society groups affiliated with Ennahda or that shared the movement's broad objec-

25. Tunisia's first two prime ministers after November 2011 elections were Ennahda members who had previously been imprisoned by the Ben Ali regime. Hamadi Jebali, who served as prime minister from December 2011 to March 2013, spent 15 years in prison, including reportedly 10 years in solitary confinement. Ali Larayedh, who served as interior minister in Jebali's cabinet and then as prime minister from March 2013 to January 2014, had previously been sentenced to 15 years in prison and was reportedly tortured repeatedly during his incarceration.

26. Habib Ellouz reportedly urged young Tunisians to join the fight against the Assad regime early in the Syrian conflict.

27. Tarek Amara, "Tunisian Islamists Ennahda Move to Separate Politics, Religion," Reuters, May 20, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-tunisia-politics/tunisian-islamists-ennahda-move-to-separate-politics-religion-idUSKCN0YB2NO>.

tives.²⁸ In discussing the move, party leader Ghannouchi claimed that “Ennahda has changed from an ideological movement engaged in the struggle for identity, to a protest movement against the authoritarian regime, and now to a national democratic party,” and that “we must keep religion far from political struggles.”²⁹ This reorganization attempted to create a distinction between the political party and a network of NGOs that were loosely connected under the Ennahda movement. The party would focus on elections, legislation, and policy; and the movement would focus on a wide range of religious and social issues, including spiritual outreach and Islamic education.³⁰

Ennahda’s announcement to separate political activity from Islamic activism was a powerful move.³¹ Though in practice politics

28. Tunisia has created one of the most permissive environments for civil society in the Middle East and North Africa following the revolution. Before the revolution, establishing an association required approval of the Ministry of Interior. A revised law in 2011 created broad protections for freedom of association. “Decree Number 88 for the Year 2011,” http://www.icnl.org/icnl_online_library_seo/Tunisia/icnl_oll_Law_88_on_Associations.html.

29. Amara, “Tunisian Islamists.”

30. One organization at the forefront of efforts to foster dialogue about the role of Islam in public affairs is the Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy (CSID), a nonprofit organization that has an office in Washington, DC, and branches throughout Tunisia. CSID has a board of directors made up of Tunisian and other scholars and an executive committee that includes prominent American academics. The organization describes its mission as “dedicated to studying Islamic and democratic political thought and merging them into a modern Islamic democratic discourse.” While some Tunisian critics claim that CSID is merely a front for Ennahda, there is no clear evidence of that. While CSID may not be directly linked to the movement, their leaderships share common visions for Tunisia. The organization is engaged in hosting numerous seminars and conferences on the role of imams in preventing extremism, imam training programs, and town-hall style meetings to discuss critical social and political issues. CSID’s Hand in Hand project, for example, compiled a handbook for training imams, which includes guidelines for Friday sermons. Approximately 400 imams have participated in the program, which has received funding from the Government of Canada. See CSID, *Report: Mechanisms for Addressing Radicalism* (Tunis, Tunisia: CSID, 2016), <https://www.csidonline.org/post/report-mechanisms-addressing-radicalism>. See also, “Hand in hand for combating extremism and terrorism” (*al-yed fil yed li-mukafahat at-tatarruf wal-irhab*), accessed June 18, 2019, <http://www.yed-fel-yed.org/>.

31. For more on the split between Ennahda’s political and religious activities, see Fabio Merone, “Politicians or Preachers: What Ennahda’s Transformation Means

and social activities remain interlinked, the shift to greater separation could allow the two broad categories to strengthen their core functions and objectives. The political party could focus on legislation and governing. When necessary it would compromise and accommodate other powerful political parties and interests in order to protect its broader social and religious efforts. The social movement could work simultaneously to advocate at the grassroots level many of the revolutionary and religious goals called for by Ennahda supporters. So far, the party and movement have shown remarkable focus and unity. Its ongoing challenge will be to maintain both unity of purpose and cohesion of its political apparatus in a Tunisian political landscape that is highly fragmented.

Equal Inheritance and Ennahda

One issue that has emerged as a source of conflict dividing Tunisians is the debate over equal inheritance rights for men and women. Late President Beji Caid Essebsi recommended revising the inheritance law in 2017 to allow women and men to receive equal shares. In June 2018, a commission appointed by the president (Presidential Committee on Individual Freedom and Equity, or COLIBE according to its French acronym) issued a series of recommendations in a 300-page report, including reforming the inheritance law to allow equal portions of inheritance for men and women.³² The report set off a political storm between the legislation's supporters and opponents.

Ennahda, which opposes changing the law, faced a lose-lose proposition in addressing the draft law. It could not support the law because it directly contradicted Qur'anic provisions for inheritance and would thus alienate its conservative base. On the other hand, opposing the law opened Ennahda up to charges that its discourse

for Tunisia," Carnegie Middle East Center, January 31, 2019, <https://carnegie-mec.org/2019/01/31/politicians-or-preachers-what-ennahda-s-transformation-means-for-tunisia-pub-78253>.

32. Despite the existing law which grants different inheritance to men and women, the legal system found a way to circumvent this through a system of property transfers.

on individual rights and equality is merely a cover to attract a broader voting base and hide its true agenda to Islamize society.³³

While partisan political officials and ideologues took a public lead for or against the law, opposition or support did not necessarily follow strict political divisions. A widely cited poll conducted by the U.S.-based International Republican Institute (IRI) illustrates the diverse composition of opposition to inheritance reform. Only 24 percent of the 1,226 respondents supported equal inheritance, including less than one-third of women polled (28 percent of women and 19 percent of men responded in support of reforming inheritance).³⁴ In contrast, 95 percent of respondents supported initiatives to fight corruption and public sector reform.³⁵ The poll highlights how fluid identity in Tunisia is despite efforts to categorize or define people as secular or religious.

Contradictory responses by state religious authorities further illustrate Tunisia's split identity. In August 2017, following the president's announcement that he would submit a bill on inheritance reform, Othman Battikh, then mufti of the republic, initially seemed to endorse the move. He claimed that it served to "reinforce women's position and guarantee the principle of equality between men and women in rights and obligations that is called for in our Islamic religion."³⁶ Several months later, Battikh shifted his position, arguing that gender equality in inheritance is not permissible in Islam, warning that changing the law could encourage extremists to target Tunisia.³⁷

33. President Essebsi's attempt to submit the draft law to parliament without sufficient public debate sparked criticism that it was a politically motivated move to undermine Ennahda.

34. Respondents were Tunisians 18 years of age or older. See International Republican Institute, *Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Tunisia January 25–February 11, 2019* (Tunis, Tunisia: International Republican Institute, 2019), 48, https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/final_-_012019_iri_tunisia_poll.pdf.

35. *Ibid.*

36. Tunisia's Diwan al-Ifta', "Congratulations to the Tunisian Woman on her National Holiday," Facebook, August 14, 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/642700865802249/posts/1671712956234363/>.

37. Wafaa al-Hakiri, "Tunisia's Dar al-Ifta' Breaks Its Silence: 'Inheritance Equality Cannot Be Legal'" (*Dar al-ifta' at-tunisiyyah takhraj 'an samtiha: 'al-musawah fil-irth la tajuz shar'an'*), *Meem Magazine*, November 27, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2XUqJAM>.

The debate over the inheritance law and other constitutional issues highlights a fundamental identity crisis within Tunisian society, where religious and progressive values, as well as the preservation of cultural norms, all factor into decisions about the country's future.

STATE EFFORTS TO REGULATE RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS

In the revolution's aftermath, Tunisia's successive governments have attempted to reassert their control over religious institutions. That effort, however, has been inconsistent and stalled by political divisions. The frequent turnover in the leadership of the Ministry of Religious Affairs means that no sustained strategy has been put forward to reform the religious sector, and most ministers have lacked vision to rethink the role of the religious establishment beyond bureaucratic and operational activities.

The lack of budget support is also frequently raised by Ministry of Religious Affairs officials as an obstacle.³⁸ This is not accidental. Authorities have consistently underfunded religious institutions in the state budget in order to keep them weak. But this has an impact on the ministry's ability to address increasingly complex challenges in the religious sphere.³⁹

38. During a private tour of Zaytouna in 2015, an official of the Ministry of Religious Affairs was adamant in pointing out the extensive air-conditioning requirements of the complex and complained that the ministry is responsible for paying the electricity bills for all of the country's mosques (September 1, 2015).

39. Saudi Arabia has reportedly provided funds for the restoration of the Okba ibn Nafaa Mosque in Kairouan, one of the oldest mosques in North Africa. See "Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques Receives Tunisian Minister of Religious Affairs," Saudi Press Agency, March 30, 2019, <https://www.spa.gov.sa/viewfullstory.php?lang=en&newsid=1905676>. Kuwait's government reportedly pledged to fund a Tunisian training institute, but the funds have not materialized. Saudi Arabia also reportedly pledged 14.5 million TD for renovations at Zaytouna Mosque in January 2018. "The Kingdom donates 20 million riyals to the restoration of Zaytouna Mosque," Sabq Online Newspaper, January 13, 2018, <https://sabq.org/KtXhbp>.

Ministry of Religious Affairs

The one area where the Ministry of Religious Affairs has made progress is reasserting the licensing and registration of mosques and imams. The Ministry of Religious Affairs, in cooperation with the Ministry of Interior, is responsible for administering and monitoring roughly 5,000 mosques in Tunisia. This includes paying the salaries of approximately 19,000 mosque workers.⁴⁰ The government set out to restore its control of the mosques and evict preachers engaging in extremist or violent discourse. The ministry, however, does not have control over unlicensed mosques or study circles that take place in people's homes or shops. It is unclear how many unlicensed prayer and study venues exist across the country.

However, leadership turnover and inconsistent attention have affected their ability to execute this strategy. Since 2011, the Ministry of Religious Affairs has had five different ministers. Each minister has had a different agenda and approach to the issue of regulation, reorganization, and reform of the religious sector.

Between December 2011 and January 2014, the controversial Nourredine al-Khademi led the Ministry of Religious Affairs. Khademi was accused by some Sufi preachers and followers of using his position to undermine Sufism, which has deep roots in Tunisia, and expel preachers who disagreed with his political agenda.⁴¹ At the same time, he reportedly appointed salafi and conservative preachers.⁴² Khademi advocated for increasing the availability of

40. Interview with the minister of religious affairs, Othman Battikh, Tunis, September 1, 2015. According to Battikh there were 19,000 mosque employees on the public payroll including daily imams, Friday imams, and maintenance staff.

41. Interview with the author, Tunis, August 30, 2015. According to a former senior religious affairs official who served under Ben Ali, Khademi appointed nearly 1,000 imams who either embraced salafism or were sympathetic to salafism. It is unclear how accurate this figure is.

42. Ennahda's effort was also aimed at appointing imams who shared its broad political and religious approach. This reportedly included salafi and conservative preachers that were loyal to Ennahda. See International Crisis Group, *Tunisia: Violence and the Salafi Challenge* (Tunis/Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2013),

Islamic education and restoring the historic role of Tunisia's religious institutions, including Zaytouna. His tenure ended when the Troika government resigned, though he remained active in Islamic NGOs after leaving office. He became president of the National Coordination Coalition to Defend the Qur'an, an organization that has been at the forefront of opposition to reforming the inheritance law. Khademi was not part of Ennahda, but he served as minister in the Ennahda-led government.

Dr. Mounir Tlili, who served as minister of religious affairs during the technocratic government of Prime Minister Mehdi Jomaa (January 2014 to February 2015), took the most strategic approach to reforming the religious sector during his short tenure. Tlili, a Zaytouna-trained scholar close to Ennahda officials, launched a far-reaching internal survey of the religious bureaucracy upon taking office. One of his findings was the low educational level and quality of imams and religious teachers in the country. According to his survey, only 10 percent of imams preaching and teaching in Tunisia had religious training from Zaytouna, and only 40 percent had earned a higher education degree in any subject above secondary school.⁴³ His conclusion, which was confirmed by other imams, was that religious educators and leaders didn't have the tools and knowledge to debate religious or sociopolitical issues that their students and mosque attendees cared about. For example, people armed with jihadi-salafi narratives would regularly challenge religious authorities and teachers, who were unable to refute those interpretations or provide alternatives in a credible way that resonated with people.

The problem of insufficiently trained and uneducated imams remains widespread and is caused by several factors. First, the role is undesirable to many people because the pay is low, and most imams have to rely on second jobs.⁴⁴ Second, the requirements for serving

<https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/tunisia/tunisia-violence-and-salafi-challenge>.

43. Some imams reportedly have not completed high school.

44. Interview with Ministry of Religious Affairs supervisor, Tunis, September 28, 2018. An imam *khamis*, who oversees daily prayers, reportedly earns 70 Tunisian

as an imam are low; these include finishing high school and passing a basic test on Islamic principles.⁴⁵ Third, the budget for imam training is very low. According to an official from the Ministry of Religious Affairs, the annual budget for imam training is just 84,000 Tunisian dinars, or approximately \$28,000. Fourth, there are few opportunities for imam training or education programs to develop higher levels of religious study, beyond universities, which may be out of reach for many Tunisians.

Tlili sought to increase the training of imams and cooperate more closely with other Arab-Muslim countries that shared a similar attachment to the Maliki school of jurisprudence. In this sense, he was looking to share best practices and benefit from the strategy implemented in Morocco. While Tunisia has a very different form of government than Morocco, the centrality of the Maliki school and Sufism creates potentially useful links between the religious establishments. During Tlili's short tenure as minister, 50 Tunisian imams trained in Morocco's imam training institute.⁴⁶

The ministry's imam training program essentially paused under Tlili's successor, Othman Battikh (February 2015 to January 2016), who was also trained at Zaytouna and served as mufti of the republic under Ben Ali.⁴⁷ Battikh opposed sending Tunisian imams to train abroad, citing a lack of budget support for imam training.⁴⁸

dinars per month, compared to 90 Tunisian dinars per month for an imam *khatib*, who delivers the Friday sermon.

45. Interview with official from Ministry of Religious Affairs, Tunis, October 1, 2018. See also Feuer, *Regulating Islam*, 168–169. Since 2003, “individuals without a background in religious scholarship would be training and supervising mosque-based educators.”

46. Interview with Mustafa Tlili, Tunis, October 1, 2018.

47. Battikh was removed from his position as minister of religious affairs over accusations of financial irregularities within the ministry. He was then reappointed as mufti of the republic by President Bejji Caid Essebsi. See “Tunisia's Grand Mufti ‘to Appear before the Judiciary on Corruption Charges,’” *Al Arabiya*, August 20, 2017, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/north-africa/2017/08/20/Tunisia-s-Grand-Mufti-to-appear-before-the-judiciary-on-corruption-charges-.html>.

48. Moroccan Ministry of Religious Affairs officials claim that they were willing to cover the costs of Tunisian imams studying in Morocco, except for airfare that they requested the Tunisian government cover. This account was confirmed by a Tunisian government official.

His tenure coincided with the return of a more security-oriented approach to monitoring mosques and regulating religious space. He was eventually ousted from the ministry but reappointed mufti of the republic by President Essebsi.

Ahmed Adhoum, who was appointed minister in March 2017, is affiliated with the secular Nidaa Tounes Party. He previously served as a civil judge and in the Ministry of Finance. Adhoum's focus has been on preventing imams from engaging in political activity or discourse and removing imams deemed too political. Prior to the May 2018 municipal elections, the ministry dismissed 15 imams and banned them from delivering Friday sermons until after the election because they allegedly were trying to influence voters through their preaching.⁴⁹

The ministry has been stricter about ensuring that imams avoid political sermons. They are required to sign a rules of conduct document, which includes avoiding preaching about controversial topics. Supervisors working through the Ministry of Religious Affairs also are mandated to provide guidance to imams and evaluate them on their Friday sermons. Reportedly the supervisors also provide feedback on style and substance to imams on the sermons.⁵⁰ But these monitoring and supervisory efforts have faced opposition from imams who don't want additional training, especially if the training is accompanied by discussions of democracy and citizenship, which is one area that some imams have protested.⁵¹ Imams have also tried to organize themselves since 2011 into several syndicates.⁵²

49. Mongi Saidani, "Campaign to Steer Tunisia Mosques Away from Political Campaigns," *Asharq Al-Awsat*, April 20, 2019, <https://aawsat.com/english/home/article/1687451/campaign-steer-tunisia-mosques-away-political-campaigns>.

50. Interview with Ministry of Religious Affairs supervisor, Tunis, September 29, 2018.

51. Interview with senior official from Ministry of Religious Affairs, Tunis, October 1, 2018.

52. Their demands typically focus on economic issues and compensation. But some have also attempted to steer an independent path on political issues that at times are at odds with the Ministry of Religious Affairs. For example, in 2018 the secretary general of the Union of Tunisian Imams publicly discouraged Tunisians

Religious Education in the School System

Unlike other Arab-Muslim countries where narrow and exclusionary Muslim narratives are widespread throughout the education system, Tunisia overhauled its textbooks and curriculum in the early 1990s. The reform launched under former president Ben Ali removed extremist language from textbooks and promoted Islamic references that encourage tolerance toward other religions and universal values.⁵³

In Tunisia, religious education in primary and secondary schools is mandated by the Ministry of Education. Since the 1990s, the amount of weekly time devoted to Islamic studies is 1 ½ hours for students from first grade to tenth grade.⁵⁴ The vast majority of the curriculum focuses on ritual and Islamic practice (*ibadat*).⁵⁵ Despite some reforms, the level of religious education is basic and low quality. Critics who support a greater role for religion in public charge that the curriculum has been too watered down to prepare students to understand their religion and the importance of Islam. According to teachers close to Ennahda, the current curriculum does not resonate with students and is insufficient. As a result, students search outside of school for other religious interpretations and can easily be manipulated by extremist discourse.

The Security Component

As Tunisia became a more open society and religious space opened up after the revolution, Tunisian authorities, including Ennahda, struggled to address growing violence and terrorism associated

from performing the pilgrimage to Mecca, because of the high cost and the fact that the money would go to pay for Saudi Arabia's wars.

53. See Muhammad Faour, *Religious Education and Pluralism in Egypt and Tunisia*, CMEC 34 (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2012), https://carnegieendowment.org/files/CMEC_34_Religion_and_Citizenship_final.pdf.

54. Feuer, *Regulating Islam*, 146.

55. In secondary school, the course is called Islamic Thinking and attempts to foster discussion without contradicting basic Islamic principles. See Faour, *Religious Education*, 9.

with jihadi-salafi movements. These movements, such as Ansar al-Sharia and later the ISG, used religious arguments and ideology to take advantage of widespread grievances and expectations to recruit followers. Within two years, Tunisia faced a homegrown terrorism threat that was shaped in part by the growth of the ISG in Libya and Syria.

Since the height of Tunisia's struggle against terrorism in 2015–2016, more senior Tunisian officials, including within the security sphere, recognize that religious institutions and leaders have a role in addressing the radicalization problem. But ultimately, political conflict and polarization have prevented Tunisia's successive governments from agreeing on a coherent vision or plan that finds an appropriate balance for Islam in public affairs. Tunisia's confrontation with jihadi-salafists has further politicized the debate over religion in society. Many secularists accuse Ennahda of harboring salafi ideas and operating a secretive military apparatus. Many conservatives in turn see the state's secular approach as fueling radicalization.

After a series of terrorist attacks from 2013 to 2015, Tunisia's government launched a crackdown on both violent and nonviolent salafi organizations. The crackdown primarily took the form of law enforcement and counterterrorism operations to arrest or kill terrorism suspects and ban organizations like Ansar al-Sharia. Over several years, Tunisian authorities developed a more comprehensive strategy to address the problem of radicalization and passed an expansive antiterrorism law in July 2015 that was widely criticized by human rights groups for its expanded powers to detain suspects based on vague charges.⁵⁶

In late 2016, Tunisia launched its “National Strategy for Combatting Violent Extremism” after repeated delays. The strategy listed 59 objectives that were based on four main pillars: prevention, protection, prosecution, and response.⁵⁷ While three out of the four

56. See “Tunisia: Counterterror Law Endangers Rights,” Human Rights Watch, July 31, 2015, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/07/31/tunisia-counterterror-law-endangers-rights>.

57. “National Strategy for Combatting Extremism and Terrorism,” Republic of Tunisia, October 2016. See also “The National Committee for Combatting Terrorism,” Republic of Tunisia, <http://www.cnlct.tn/>.

pillars focus primarily on law enforcement and security methods, a fourth pillar, prevention, touches briefly on the role of religion in combatting extremism. Objective six in the document calls for “Promoting comprehensive education and spreading a culture of tolerance, diversity, and accepting the other” as well as “Developing a moderate and tolerant religious discourse.” Objective 13 calls for “Preventing radicalization in prisons and places of worship, while respecting human rights.”⁵⁸ A series of action plans were intended to clarify strategies for each pillar. Like many national strategy documents, Tunisia’s plan was more of a wish list than an actual strategy, and with 59 objectives it didn’t clearly make choices about its priorities. While jihadi-salafi violence has declined dramatically since 2016, implementation of the prevention component of the strategy has been limited.

STRUGGLE FOR ZAYTOUNA

Zaytouna today still sits at the crux of Tunisian identity, of modernity and Islam. The balance Zaytouna has provided in the past will be essential in assisting Tunisia overcome deep political divides. It has been held as a model of Tunisian identity and a tool to help counter extremist ideologies. However, conflicts over control of the mosque and its role in the country themselves comprise a political battle highlighting the internal fault lines in religion, governance, and identity in Tunisia.

Zaytouna and the idea of reviving Tunisian Islam became a signature issue for Ennahda, which argued that it could be a bridge between Islam and democracy in Tunisia. Other conservative Islamists also saw restoring Zaytouna’s preindependence role as a strategy

58. The remaining objectives cover a wide range of issues. These include promoting the role of women in the prevention of radicalization (objective 4); setting up a legislative framework that facilitates the implementation of the strategy (objective 11); addressing the socioeconomic conditions that lead to extremism (objective 5); ensuring that the discourse of the political elite and civil society is devoid of any justifications for terrorist acts; cooperating with international actors (objective 10); and combating the phenomena of foreign fighters (objective 17). *Ibid.*

for reasserting Islam's centrality in public life. In 2011, a group of Islamic activists established the Friends of Zaytouna Mosque organization, which advocated reviving Zaytouna's educational activities and reaffirming its role as a mosque-university.⁵⁹ Ennahda was not formally part of the effort, but it supported the broader goal of reviving Zaytouna, and many of its leaders and activists argued that a strong Zaytouna was critical for spreading a tolerant or traditional Tunisian Islamic narrative that would help undermine extremism.⁶⁰

In May 2012, Friends of Zaytouna reached an agreement with the Ministry of Higher Education and the Ministry of Religious Affairs to resume educational activities at the mosque by creating an educational council of Zaytouna. The agreement stated that Zaytouna Mosque "is an independent Islamic educational scientific institution that is not affiliated with the state and enjoys legal personality [status]."⁶¹ This move marked a major yet short-lived victory in the effort to shake off decades of state control and reassert Zaytouna as an independent religious and educational institution. However, the agreement soon became the source of conflict and legal struggles. A few months after it was signed, the ministries involved in signing the document declared that Zaytouna's educational council is "legally subordinate to the head of the government," and that the mosque's administration, including appointment of imams, muezzins, and all other activities, are the responsibility of the Ministry of Religious Affairs.⁶²

What is notable about the struggle for control of Zaytouna during this period is that it was not a binary battle between secularists and Islamists. Instead, it was a battle between different Islamists who

59. Joseph Croitoru, "Controversy Surrounding the Al-Zaytouna Mosque in Tunis," *Qantara*, August 22, 2012, <https://en.qantara.de/content/controversy-surrounding-the-al-zaytouna-mosque-in-tunis-the-ambivalent-revival-of-islamic>.

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

61. "The Tunisian Judiciary Recognizes the Independence of the Zaytouna Mosque from the Government of Jabali," *France 24*, August 8, 2012, <https://bit.ly/2LQTU6t>.

62. *Ibid.*

supported the restoration of Islam in public life. Ennahda was at the forefront of this debate. While it was the most influential voice because of its government position, size, and network, it could not impose its positions even within the religious sphere. It faced competition from within government ministries that were nominally under the control of the government that it headed and from other Islamist individuals who sought to pressure the party to take more aggressive steps on religious issues.

For example, then minister of religious affairs, Nourredine al-Khademi, often took hardline positions on issues that were counter to Ennahda's efforts to prevent political conflict and support compromise when necessary. Figures like Khademi were a liability not only because they challenged Ennahda's political agenda, but they reportedly preached *takfiri* ideas while serving as an imam in Tunis and urged young Tunisians to join the jihad against the Assad regime in Syria.⁶³ Houcine Laabidi, a former electrician with no formal religious training, took control of Zaytouna Mosque in early 2012 and declared himself imam.⁶⁴ Laabidi had been quoted as calling for violence against Tunisian artists who created what he referred to as "blasphemous" art.⁶⁵

Laabidi also repeatedly challenged the Ennahda-led government on the issue of Islamic endowments, or *habous*. According to Laabidi and other activists, nearly half of the country's farmland had been owned by Zaytouna through endowments before they were nationalized by Bourguiba. He vocally advocated for the return of all nationalized property.⁶⁶ During that same period, Ennahda was

63. "Noureddine Khademi appelait les Tunisiens au jihad en Syrie," *Turess*, March 19, 2013, <https://www.turess.com/fr/businessnews/36990>.

64. Frida Dahmani, "Hocine Laabadi, 'The Irreducible Tunisian Imam,'" *Jeune Afrique*, August 7, 2013, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/136633/politique/houcine-laabidi-l-irreductible-imam-tunisien/>.

65. "Tunis: Imam of Tunis Mosque, Blasphemous Artists Must Die," *Ansamed*, June 15, 2012, http://www.ansamed.info/ansamed/en/news/nations/tunisia/2012/06/15/Tunis-Imam-Tunis-mosque-Blasphemous-artists-must-die_7044443.html.

66. See "Placing a Hand on Zaytouna's Religious Endowments: A New Battle against Ennahda for the Great Mosque," *Middle East Online*, November 14, 2013,

advocating a new draft habous law that would reestablish the legality of Islamic endowments. Ennahda's draft law, which was hotly contested and eventually abandoned, however, only sought to create new endowments, not restore property that had been nationalized as Laabidi advocated.⁶⁷

Ennahda had long sought to loosen government restrictions on independent religious activity, but its position evolved to advocate for greater state control of religious institutions. The Ministry of Religious Affairs, nominally under its control, was actively attempting to reassert control over the mosques that had been overtaken by nongovernment-sanctioned preachers. It was also forced to move against and outlaw salafi groups including Ansar al-Sharia following a mob attack on the U.S. Embassy in Tunis in September 2012,⁶⁸ a move that was opposed by some Ennahda officials such as Habib Ellouz.⁶⁹ This put the movement's leadership in a difficult position with its more conservative supporters who wanted immediate changes, as well as other salafists and conservative Islamic organizations who advocated for greater religious independence. At the same time, Ennahda was locked in political conflict with its secular rivals who constantly accused Ennahda of harboring a secretive agenda to Islamize society. In most cases, Ennahda chose political compromise toward the center in order to avoid conflict with powerful vested interests of the previous regime. Such struggles between secular and Islamist forces continue to play out in Tunisia's political and social spheres.

<https://bit.ly/2VvCBqX>; "An Imam of the Zaytouna Mosque in Tunis Demands that the Government Return Endowments of the Famous Mosque," *Annahar*, November 13, 2013, <https://bit.ly/2EfRAj7>.

67. In 2017, Rached Ghannouchi raised the idea of a new draft law on Islamic endowments that he compared to foundations in the United States. See Nisreen Ramdani, "Ghannouchi's Attempt to Restore the Endowments Law Is Causing Trouble in Tunisia," *Al-Arab*, August 31, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2YyfwWr>.

68. Tarek Amara, "Two Dead as Protesters Attack U.S. Embassy in Tunisia," Reuters, September 14, 2012, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-protests-tunisia-school/two-dead-as-protesters-attack-u-s-embassy-in-tunisia-idUSBRE88D18020120914>.

69. Interview with Habib Ellouz, Tunis, November 21, 2013.

LOOKING FORWARD

Tunisia's most important gain since the revolution is freedom of expression. In a freer environment, Tunisia has the potential for a more robust and probing debate on its national identity and how to balance Islam and modernity. Zaytouna is at the center of that debate. How Tunisia reconciles its national identity crisis and balances Islam and public life remains an important test facing the political class that will shape the country's future development. The challenge will be finding an equilibrium between strengthening Islamic institutions that can potentially play a positive role in undermining exclusionary or violent interpretations of Islam without Islam being politicized in a way that encroaches on Tunisia's newfound freedoms.

It will not be easy for postauthoritarian political elites to find that balance. Political polarization has intensified, while many politicians are driven by personal ambition and agendas rather than a sense of national interest. Moreover, many Tunisians are scarred by their past in different ways. Those who want a greater role for Zaytouna and Islam see many of today's security problems stemming from the state's legacy of repressing religion. They fear secularists will use legal methods to constrain their freedoms once again and return to authoritarian methods. Those who want to maintain a separation between religion and politics fear that the power of Islam and success of Islamist parties at the ballot box could be used to impose religious norms and curtail basic freedoms, including women's rights.

Tunisia's ambivalence toward regulating Islam beyond monitoring and a security-dominated policy will ensure that Islam remains a source of division among Tunisians. Looking forward, it is important for Tunisians and outside observers to understand several important factors that will shape Tunisia's religious landscape.

Tunisia's historical experience illustrates that state-led efforts to impose identity and norms are either temporary or incomplete. Tunisia's identity is complex and comprised of multiple layers of culture and experiences. It cannot be easily summed up or defined in such broad terms as religious or secular. The debate and opposition

to reforming inheritance laws demonstrate the complexity of Tunisia's identity, which is more conservative than most Western observers have acknowledged. Instead, Tunisia's culture demonstrates the importance of Islamic practice coexisting with respect for the sanctity of basic universal values of freedom of expression and association. Identity is fluid, and as Tunisia develops, its national identity will continue evolving.

Without devoting more resources to imam training, improving education opportunities, and improving the quality of religious education, Tunisia's religious sphere will continue to be weak and a source of political division. As a transitioning country, Tunisia has been dependent on international loans for budgetary support. Yet, the importance of devoting resources to priority areas is the state's responsibility and should not depend on international assistance.

Tunisia's history demonstrates that oversecuritizing or repressing legitimate Islamic expression creates more insecurity. By eliminating traditional sources of religious authority and legitimacy, Tunisia has been unable to compete with salafi and narrow Islamic interpretations, including those minority narratives espousing violence. While Tunisia faces legitimate security threats from radicalized individuals, its most strategic threat is a disillusioned and marginalized youth population that is gripped by a sense of injustice and indignity. As long as Tunisia fails to address its shortcomings towards its younger population, it will face insecurity.

Political conflict and polarization undermine efforts to find a practical balance and role for Islam in society. The politicization of religious issues like inheritance reform and attempts to impose legislation that affects religious principles without sufficient debate will further polarize the population. Tunisia's political polarization continues to prevent religious leaders and government officials from developing a coherent policy toward religion.

Given the importance of religion as a social and political force in the country, the state cannot afford to ignore the need for some level of religious regulation. As long as the state and political elites view Islam primarily as a threat, however, it will be difficult to develop Islamic institutions that are more capable of addressing challenges

and playing a positive role in Tunisia's development. Political elites should continue to debate the right balance of religion in public affairs and seek to move beyond narrow ideological or partisan positions. As long as Tunisia's government does not lead in articulating a clear policy toward regulating religious affairs, nonstate actors, including salafi groups, will continue dominating religious discourse.

Civil society has an important role in developing plans and guidelines for imam training and religious education reform. But civil society cannot replace the state's role in regulating Islamic institutions, legislating practical policies, and implementing those plans. Without cooperation between government and civil society and public-private partnerships, it is unlikely that a consensus that is pragmatic will be reached toward effectively governing religious space.

Although Tunisia's newfound freedom of expression is its greatest asset, this very achievement makes reaching a consensus on identity more elusive. Given the fraught history of Islam in the country, it is unlikely that the role of religion in society will be resolved in a conclusive way. Instead, Islam and democratic norms will be forced to coexist in Tunisia in ways that may not deliver the decisive outcomes that partisans on all sides of the debate want but that most Tunisians can accept as their cultural and historical legacy.