Political Identities and Popular Uprisings in the Middle East

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People participating in the revolutionary protests were exposed to new forms of living, thinking and expressing themselves – a new subjectivity – which temporarily or permanently altered their identity. Apart from the truism that identities are fluid and composite in nature, this experience illustrates that revolutions are not made by revolutionary people, but that revolutionary people are made by revolutions. It also underlines that ‘popular identity’ remains a politically ambiguous signifier, which can be easily appropriated by authoritarian interpretations, unless it is connected to a real emancipatory mass movement, which fills the category with a practical content.

Some interpretations have blamed the concept of ‘the people’ itself for Egypt’s current descent into violence, exclusion and nationalist authoritarianism, as the premise of popular unity precludes diversity and minority positions (Gerbaudo 2014). However, the 18 Days illustrated that ‘the people’, as a collective actor, can be both united and diverse, and that it can articulate a ‘general will’ that is inclusive and respectful of internal differences. The real challenge to emancipation is not a unitary concept of ‘the people’, but the mediation of popular sovereignty by an external authoritarian force.

NOTES

2. A fourteen-story modernist style administrative building that dominates Tahrir Square, built in the 1940s.
3. Activist is deployed here in its broad, common sense meaning of people dedicating time, energy and other resources to a project that transcends their immediate interests.
4. A popular and military uprising in Egypt from 1879 to 1882 led by Colonel Ahmed ‘Urabi against Khedive Tawfiq Pasha and British and French dominion, which could be interpreted as the first modern nationalist mass movement.

Chapter 9

The Tunisian Uprising, Ennahdha and the Revival of an Arab-Islamic Identity

Rory McCarthy

In the new landscape of Tunisian politics shaped by the 2011 uprising, it became commonplace to accuse the leaders of the Islamist movement Ennahdha of resorting to a divisive politics of identity. It seemed to their critics that Ennahdha’s promotion of what it called ‘Arab-Islamic identity’ was an opportunistic sleight-of-hand intended to appropriate a successful popular uprising that had never been of their making. In this critique, identity politics was regarded as superficial, polarising, deployed only by Islamists, and a distraction from urgent social and economic challenges. It was in this vein that the Lebanese writer Elias Khoury condemned Islamists across the region for resorting to what he called ‘a simplification of politics that reduces political action to ideological or religious slogans’ (Khoury 2012). Writing about Tunisia, in particular, Mohamed-Salah Omri saw the Islamists as trying to drag their opponents away from the original revolutionary demands of work, freedom and dignity. ‘If there is any meaning to the terms “hijacking” or “stealing” the revolution, this would be it. It consists in displacing the terrain, changing the slogans and inventing a narrative. Identity politics and its attendant economics are not commensurate with the revolution and are therefore seeds for further unrest and continued protest’ (Omri 2013).

Indeed, there was a shift in the months after the uprising away from popular economic and political demands into a very different battle over culture and identity fought out between political elites. However, the battle was not new, not unique to the Islamists and not as straightforward as it seemed. Instead, the identity debate marked a return to an unresolved historical contest over how the Tunisian nation identified itself and its culture. After all, as Omri himself rightly notes, expressions of identity, whether ethnic or religious, were one of the victims of dictatorship (Omri 2013). Thus, under the new freedoms after 2011 Ennahdha was by no means the only party to appeal
to collective identity. Beji Caid Essebsi, a veteran politician, made huge political gains by casting himself squarely as the inheritor of the legacy of Tunisia's independence leader, Habib Bourguiba. In his hands, Bourguibism became a reinvented tradition that generated a fear of Islamist radicalism and harnessed a sense of yearning for a pseudo-golden age of secularism, women's rights, economic prosperity and political stability, while all the time conveniently skirting any critique of the punitive authoritarianism of the postcolonial era. Ennahda was not the only political party to defend its particular conception of national identity. Both Ennahda's allies in government, al-Mu'tamar min 'ajl al-Jumhuriyya (Congress for the Republic, or CPR by its French initials) and al-Takattul al-Dimuqrati min 'ajl al-'Amal wa al-Hurriyyat, known as Ettakatol, also aligned themselves with a national identity that was Arab-Islamic even though they were more centrist and secularist parties than the Islamists. Certainly, there was an elite political rhetoric that was often divisive, but identity was not simply a superficial, tactical rush to power.

Ennahda used identity both to promote a vision of social and political activism that was about more than mere self-interest, and as self-identification to bind together a religious movement. This chapter argues that Ennahda forged its particular understandings of identity in a long historical context with the state, which had sought to monopolise not only legitimate physical force but also symbolic force. By the mid-1980s, the forerunner to Ennahda, Harakat al-Ittihat al-Islami (the Islamic Tendency Movement or MTK by its French initials), had explicitly endorsed democracy and popular, not divine, sovereignty, well ahead of most other Islamist movements in the region. It sought to compete in a free political process for power in a civil, not religious, state and advocated a political programme that it insisted offered a more 'authentic' political vision, drawing on Tunisia's Islamic history. Even in the 1980s, the MTK already showed early signs of what later was identified elsewhere as 'post-Islamism', a shift in trajectory defined in different ways but meaning, in Asef Bayat's reading, that the movement had transcended from a project of trying to install a top-down Islamic order into a democratic political party that sought to combine religiosity and faith with rights and freedoms (Bayat 2013a). Arab-Islamic identity became a crucial lynchpin to this often awkward and tense evolution.

Since its early history, Ennahda had also worked to create a distinctly bounded group and relied on a range of social activities to cement its connectedness, creating strong ties. However, by the time of the 2011 uprising these bonds had become diluted and the sense of a shared identity had weakened. This was, in part, the result of two decades of repression under the former president Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali. But it was also because of a new ambiguity in the movement's political vision as its ideas evolved and shifted under the constraints of compromise and concession required by its participation in the political process. As Ennahda drew away from its Islamist roots, it used the glue of identity as a broad ambiguous concept to try to hold together an increasingly fragmented organisation.

In making this argument, I draw on repeated field trips to Tunisia since 2011, including an extended fourteen-month stay in the coastal city of Sousse spent interviewing Ennahda members and observing the activities of the movement. Sousse has played a political role in Tunisia's history, which was disproportionate to its small size. Much of the political elite have been drawn from the city since before independence, including Ben Ali himself, but its poorer districts have also provided unexpected sources of support for both Ennahda and Salafist radicals. It quickly became clear during my field work that identity for Ennahda was part of its daily practice, by which I mean that it was used to make sense of what the movement stood for, how it differed from its rivals and in shaping a political programme, all of which evolved over time. I seek here to identify and analyse the processes, understandings and sense of belonging that lay behind Ennahda's use of identity and to map how that evolved as a result of the 2011 uprising.

Throughout this chapter I use that word 'uprising' to denote the protests that rocked Tunisia from 17 December 2010, eventually leading to the fall of Ben Ali on 14 January 2011 and the start of a hopeful transition to democracy. Though Tunisians themselves often talked of the fall of the regime as a 'revolution', I am less convinced that deep-seated change has taken place. After all, the mass protests that took place pushed for reforms within the institutions of the existing state and the main political and economic elements of the regime remained intact. What happened might perhaps be even better described as a 'reformulation' following the formulation devised by Timothy Garton Ash when looking at Poland and Hungary in 1989, in the sense that there was an element of negotiation between protesters and the established political elite (Bayat 2013, 53, Garton Ash 1989). Even four years on from the uprising, major institutions of state, including the judiciary and the security services, remained largely unreformed. The deep state persisted. Political actors with links to the former regime returned to power and tried to prioritise stability and security ahead of a resolution of the socio-economic crisis that triggered the initial uprising. The oft-used term 'Arab Spring' suggests an inevitable progression through the seasons to a foreboding authoritarian or even Islamist winter. However, in Tunisia, this is not yet inevitable and this springtime analogy is perhaps inappropriate. What took place from 17 December 2010 was an uprising, broad and leaderless, but it unleashed a momentum that has not yet fully run its course. Protests against the political establishment and the slow pace of change continue, with regular strikes, industrial stoppages, sit-ins and demonstrations. This uprising was more than
a single spring moment; it reflected a new, ongoing sense of empowerment and hunger for accountability.

In this chapter, I first explore the origins of the debate around Arab-Islamic identity to argue that this developed particularly Tunisian characteristics because it grew out of a specifically Tunisian political and economic context between Islamists and the postcolonial elite. I then demonstrate how the challenges of new competitive politics in the wake of the 2011 uprising forced Ennahdha to reposition itself politically, relying on an often ambiguous moral project that had a cultural Islamic identity at its heart. Finally, I explore how through the democratic transition and the drafting of a new constitution, Ennahdha sought to construct a new consensus of public opinion in favour of Arab-Islamic identity. Although it made some progress in this direction, the challenge also revealed deep internal divisions within the movement itself about its new evolution.

**ORIGINS OF AN IDENTITY CONTEST**

Ennahdha’s political vision has long depended on a particular conception of national identity. Since the movement first developed from a loosely structured preaching organisation focused on morality and mosque classes to an overtly political force in the early 1980s, it has identified itself as the champion of an imperilled cultural authenticity. The MIT presented its embrace of Arab-Islamic identity as a defensive reaction against the imposition of aggressive modernising programmes by postcolonial elites. On 6 June 1981, when the MIT first appeared in public and demanded legal authorisation to form a political party, it identified as its primary goal the awakening of the ‘Islamic personality’ to challenge the self-alienation of society caused by the Western-leaning Bourguiba elite, ‘dominating internal minorities who have detached from their origins and clashed with the aspirations of their people’ (Harakat al-Ijtihad al-Islami 2012, 11). Its programme included what might be considered a claim to establish an Islamic state in that it argued for the establishment of a ‘contemporary image of the Islamic system of government’. Over the previous three decades, Bourguiba had undermined the clerical elite, nationalised habsis land (equivalent to waqf in the Mashreq), stripped the prestigious Zaytuna mosque-university of its independence and publicly criticised the pilgrimage, the Ramadan fast and the wearing of the veil. The MIT proposed an alternative cultural project loyal to Tunisian history and to Islam, ‘the axis of our cultural personality’ (Harakat al-Ijtihad al-Islami 2012, 11).

In this cultural battle, the MIT drew initially on the ideas of fellow Islamist movements in the Middle East. The writings of Egypt’s Muslim Brothers were an important intellectual reference, including Hassan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb, whose Quranic commentary *In the Shade of the Quran* was widely read by the first generations of Tunisian Islamists. In the 1970s, the Tunisian movement, known then as al-Jama’a al-Islamiyya (The Islamic Group), focused on preaching in mosques in Tunis and in other major cities, providing Quranic study classes and building a like-minded community with shared ethical commitments that mirrored the Muslim Brothers’ Islamising project. However, this is not to argue that the Tunisian movement was a mere branch of the larger Egyptian organisation or that it employed ideas that were somehow imported or alien to Tunisia, even though this remains a common criticism voiced by rival politicians today. Although the MIT regarded itself as firmly part of the broader regional Arab and Muslim world, from 1981 it carved its own path, building its project on a distinctly Tunisian foundation, and confining its ambitions within its nation state. Thus, the MIT emphasised a Tunisian heritage, drawing on a particular narrative built around notable religious intellectuals and symbols, including the Zaytuna mosque. Many of the new adherents to the movement had fathers and grandfathers who had studied at Zaytuna and some of the movement’s own ideologues had taught there, notably Hamida Emeifer, a cofounder who had been a critic of Hassan al-Banna (Tamimi 2001, 45). Rather than adopting a Brotherhood-style emphasis on the immediate imposition of the sharia, the Tunisian movement was much more nuanced in its views on Islamic law. Its understanding of sharia instead drew heavily on the work of Mohamed Tahar Ben Aachour (1879–1973), a reformist Zaytuna scholar who proposed that the sharia should be seen as offering an enlarged set of objectives (maqasid) including freedom, rights, civility and equality, in a reading that departed from both strict literalism and rationalism (Ibn Ashur 2011, Cavatori and Merone 2015, 35). Furthermore, democracy was soon adopted as the political priority, in part, under the influence of the Algerian writer Mulek Bennabi and in part in reaction to the exclusionary one-party regime in Tunisia, and again this distanced the Tunisians from their Egyptian references. One of the MIT’s most important texts, *al-Ru’iyya al-Fikriyya wal-Manhaj al-Ushuli* (The Intellectual Vision and the Fundamental Approach), produced in 1986 but still considered central today, emphasised a harmonious relationship between revelation and reason, and allowed for a contemporary contextual interpretation of the holy texts through independent effort, *ijtihad*. The result was that the movement gave prominence in its political programme to interaction with Tunisian society as well as embracing notions of pluralism, tolerance and democracy, all of which ‘implied the option for a specifically Tunisian path to Islam and modernity’ (Krämer 1994, 216).

The movement’s project was a reimagining of what it meant to be modern, forged in a specifically Tunisian political and economic contest. On university campuses, this was an intellectual (and sometimes physical) battle fought
with leftist movements, which had dominated opposition to the regime in the 1970s. As the influence of the left declined, it became especially a contest between the Islamists and the regime. After all, Bourguiba too was seeking to create his own understanding of *tunisianité* and, though often seen as an arch-secularist, he frequently deployed religious vocabulary and symbols to achieve his ends, calling on the same Tunisian heritage as the Islamists, including even the symbolism of Zaytuna (Hajji 2004, Frégosi 2004). Both Bourguiba and Ben Ali after him sought to regulate religious affairs and control religious symbols in order to monopolise political activity. For example, just a month after the first MTI press conference in mid-1981, Bourguiba’s regime tried to burnish its own religious credentials by announcing new rules to impose the Ramadan fast. Where once Bourguiba had criticised the fast as an impediment to national development, now his government closed cafés and restaurants and restricted official working hours (although it soon had to backtrack after public criticism, a sign of the limits of the state’s reach).

Similarly Ben Ali, immediately after his 7 November 1987 coup, strove to appropriate the language of Islamic identity. He gave Zaytuna back its autonomy, allowed state radio and television to broadcast the call to prayer, and went on a well-publicised pilgrimage to Mecca. He encouraged all major political parties, including a representative of the MTI (which in late 1988 renamed itself Ennahda in the hope of winning legal authorisation), to sign his National Pact, which talked of Tunisia’s ‘specific Arab-Islamic identity’. Yet both Bourguiba and Ben Ali painted the Islamists as a threat to the social, economic and security interests of the Tunisian middle class. They were identified as outsiders, ideologically intolerant, terrorists and subversives—a major trial against the MTI leadership in Bourguiba’s final months in power in 1987 even accused them of being agents of Khomeini’s Iran. In fact, the Tunisian regime was intent on making religion entirely a matter for state control, a coercive strategy in which the state would determine, for example, what the imam should say in his Friday sermon, how mosques could be used or whether women should be allowed to cover their hair. Little wonder then that in 2012 Rachid Ghannouchi, the Ennahda leader, described the challenge for his movement as ‘liberating religion from the state’ (Ghannouchi 2012). The self-identification of the MTI and later Ennahda was forged in constant competition with the state’s own narrative. It was a political struggle fought through an Islamic repertoire of vocabulary and symbolism.

Identity was not just a political project, but also a source of community bonding. The movement had a distinct sense of where it was located in Tunisian society, a subjective understanding of shared common attributes. This was a product, in part, of a class dynamic. The MTI was a movement of a lower middle class that had adopted a distinctly leftist tone in its early economic policies in 1981, calling for the ‘fair distribution of wealth’ and aligning themselves with the ranks of the *mustaṣafīn* (oppressed) against the wealthy *mustaḥquirīn* (oppressors) (Harakat al-Ittiḥād al-Islāmi). Members of the movement were often from rural areas and were mobilised in school and university dormitories in major cities, while separated from their families. As one Ennahda leader, who in the 1970s was a secondary school pupil in Monastir, put it:

*People became for each other another father or mother or brother because of the isolation and distance from their families. And that was a benefit for us in calling people to prayer, to Islam, to good morals, to remind people of their history and its glory. (Senior Ennahda member 2014)*

They represented what Zghal called a ‘new social periphery’, struggling against social marginalisation (Zghal 1991, 217). In the 1980s after graduation (often, but not uniquely, in science and technology subjects), the young Islamists became teachers, academics, doctors, lawyers and, less often, businessmen. The movement worked hard to create a discrete community, a sense of belonging to a distinctive bounded group, through carefully organised daily activities. Pupils and students were encouraged to play football together as much as to study the Quran. Wedding ceremonies were reimagined: costs were reduced, friends in the community made contributions, alcohol and the mingling of men and women was avoided, and local musical groups emerged singing their own religiously inspired songs, avoiding the loud pipes and drums normally associated with Tunisian weddings. Local traditions were upturned. As one Ennahda member from a semi-rural suburb of Sousse, who was himself married in one of these weddings, remembered:

*We have a tradition here that the groom goes to the café, which is the emblem of manhood. But we didn’t go to the café, we went to the mosque and prayed in the mosque, and the contract of marriage we did in the mosque not at the local administration. ... Why did people marry? They married in order to have children, to have a new generation, a correct generation, to serve their religion and their nation. (Local Ennahda member 2014a)*

This was what Nira Yuval-Davis identifies elsewhere as a ‘politics of belonging’, with a selective narrative of the movement’s self-identification reproduced from generation to generation, a strong component of emotional attachment, and an important ethnic element, which members of the movement drew on to find their place in the world and to define their political struggle (Yuval-Davis 2006). Thus, collective identity could not be understood outside a whole set of social practices, from studying, to sports, to music, to social occasions. This produced very close bonds within the MTI/Ennahda community, dense networks that were inward looking and
effective in mobilising a social solidarity. But this construction of identity was exclusive in that it drew the movement away from forming connections with political allies. The resulting isolation was a failing that Ennahda itself later admitted: when the movement was confronted by a repressive regime it had no allies to whom it could turn.

This sense of connectedness was severely and purposefully disrupted by Ben Ali’s crackdown against the movement, which began shortly after Ennahda’s strong showing in the April 1989 elections. Although some managed to escape into exile, around 30,000 of the movement’s members were jailed and the movement was outlawed, dismantled and ostracised in a campaign known as taffi al-manabi (drying the springs). Even those released after a few months were banned from working in the public sector and were placed under the punitive system of administrative control, in which they had to sign in regularly at police and National Guard stations. It was almost impossible to gather as Islamists in public, attend weddings or organise shared activities. Political mobilisation was usually quickly punished. Being Islamist in the 1990s and 2000s became an isolated, personal and repressive experience.

Stripped of the political, the Islamists’ own self-identification became closer to what it had been in the 1970s: an emphasis on morality and correct comportment in line with religious commitments like prayer and fasting, but this time as individuals in the privacy of their homes or workplace rather than in groups or in the public space of the mosque. Two decades of repression had done much to undo a previously strong social solidarity.

Ennahda, then, had proposed a vision of identity from the earliest days of its political project. This was presented as a cultural alternative to the modernising postcolonial regime, but it was rooted in a distinctly Tunisian political and economic context and employed Tunisian references, ideas and symbolism. Class and the community of belonging also shaped the shifting contours of this identity project so that by 2011 it represented far more than a disruptive, tactical political tool but rather a broad, if ambiguous vision, that was at once social, economic and political.

**ARAB-ISLAMIC IDENTITY AND THE 2011 UPRISING**

The opportunities and challenges presented by the rapid fall of Ben Ali required all parties to rethink their political visions. The actual political process was surprisingly orderly. Immediately after Ben Ali fled for Saudi Arabia on 14 January, a reshuffled government, including some opposition figures, took over. After street protests continued for several weeks, this cabinet was forced to resign and a 155-member transitional body was then established, the High Authority for the Realisation of the Objectives of the Revolution.
the nationalist Destour party in 1921, and Mohamed Tahar Ben Achour, the reformist magaсид scholar (Ennahdha 2011). From that moment, the movement adopted a populist tone, siding with the ongoing street protests against the political elites, and endorsing popular calls for transitional justice. Ghannouchi criticised the deeply unpopular cabinet that had taken over after Ben Ali’s fall, which included some opposition leaders alongside former regime figures, and called for prosecutions of security officials responsible for killing demonstrators. He said Arabisation, especially in education, was a priority and spoke out publicly against code-switching between Arabic and French as ‘language pollution’ (Agence France Presse 2011). On the ground, Ennahdha activists worked to exclude former regime officials even at a municipal level in some areas. For example, in Ettadhamen, a large, working-class suburb of western Tunis, Ennahdha took a lead role in the locally organised Committee to Protect the Revolution, which nominated new members of the municipal council, excluded municipal officials seen as still loyal to the former ruling party, the Rassemblement Constitutionnel Démocratique (RCD) and tried to restart local services, like rubbish collection (Hassine 2011). In June 2011, the movement pulled out of the High Authority, complaining it was a bastion of the secular, leftist, Francophone elite that was trying to pre-empt the coming elections, which had already been delayed from July to October. As Ghannouchi told a party rally in Tunis: ‘The street must move when there is a threat against the revolution. We have to be guardians of this revolution because it’s ours’ (Ghannouchi 2011b). Ennahdha sought to co-opt the uprising as its own and to identify with the demonstrators against the political elites.

Identity as political vision was once again forged out of political contest. Now, the dispute for Ennahdha was not with the regime’s monopoly of Islam, but with other opposition parties and their different visions for a future Tunisia. Ennahdha accused its rivals of being elitist, fearful of a democratic ballot and out of touch with their religiously conservative population. In turn, the opposition accused Ennahdha of instrumentalising religion for political gain. ‘At the moment they resemble an ‘ideological’ party with all the risks that entails,’ said Nejib Chebbi, the founder of the centre-left Parti Démocrate Progressiste (PDP). ‘Tunisians don’t want to have an ideology restrain their freedoms’ (Dahmani 2011). However, this dispute was mostly rhetorical. All parties broadly agreed on the institutional shape of the new Tunisia: that it should be a pluralist, civil, democratic republic with a mixed parliamentary and presidential system of government whose powers would be defined by a new constitution written by an elected assembly. Most also agreed that the state should maintain some guardianship role over religious institutions. After all, In 2005, opposition parties ranging from the communists to Ennahdha had agreed a shared vision of a secular, democratic, pluralist Tunisia that underlined the nation’s Arab-Islamic heritage (PDP 2007). What was in dispute after 2011, then, is best understood as a rivalry over ‘ways of life’ and different concepts of freedom, belief and conduct (Zeghal 2013). What Ennahdha proposed was a project of ‘morality’, in which it would participate in a democratic process and endorse ‘freedom’ as a broad concept but to which it would add an additional, undefined ethical dimension. This was usefully ambiguous, making up for the fact that Ennahdha had not sketched a detailed architecture of how it believed a contemporary Islamic state should operate. It also reflected the sense that Ennahdha’s path towards democracy had not begun from Western models, but with Bennabi and the Islamic concept of sharia (consultation). For Ghannouchi had long been critical of Western democracy, which he saw as flawed by man’s pursuit of material self-interest. Ennahdha tried to position itself as a moral force: a movement with a conservative social code but that was ready to tackle the moral and financial corruption that had blighted the last decade of Ben Ali’s rule. ‘People were seeking morality in politics and the economy,’ Ghannouchi said. ‘The elite have corrupted the state. Our society sought a real social change within its values’ (Ghannouchi 2011a). Ennahdha leaders now defined their movement not as Islamist, but as a political party with an Islamic reference. They likened themselves to a European-style Christian social democratic movement or to Turkey’s Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AKP), which both drew on religious references and emphasised cultural and moral issues. As Samir Dilou, a member of the movement’s Executive Bureau, said:

For us to be a Tunisian Islamist party is to be realistic and pragmatic and to accept that the Muslim religion is not a programme but a background. It is the fact of speaking for a moralisation of political life. (Dilou 2011)

The challenge, though, was to determine precisely what this meant in practice. Perhaps the clearest target for this moral project was the perceived abuse of freedom of expression. By setting limits on what people said, or painted, or sculpted, the movement presented itself as a defender of Islamic values. In mid-2011, after a self-described atheist Tunisian director produced a film about secularism, Ni Allah ni Maitre! (Neither God nor Master), Ennahdha officials dismissed it as part of a ‘provocative’ war against the movement (Arbaoui 2011). In October, shortly before the first elections, Hamadi Jebali criticised a television broadcast of the cartoon film Persepolis as a ‘flagrant attack on the divine’ because it included a scene with a representation of God (Jebali 2011). An art exhibition at the Palais Abdellia, in Tunis, in June 2012, was again described by Jebali as an ‘attack on the sacred’ because some
of the artworks touched on religious questions (Leaders 2012). This was an effort by the movement to reconstruct an identity based on morality and to shift the social norms in its favour. It was a result of a post-Islamist evolution of the movement, meaning it had moved from its original goal of controlling the state to impose an Islamic order towards becoming a socially conservative political party that accepted participation in a civil, democratic state and the rights and freedoms that entailed. It recast the role of Islam for Ennahda and placed a cultural Islamic identity at the heart of its public discourse.

As Olivier Roy argues about post-Islamism more broadly, this did not offer a blueprint for ruling but rather an ‘emotional and vague narrative’ that tended to centre on censorship and gender issues (Roy 2013, 14, 17). It also served to forge party unity at a time when internal debates were growing sharper, particularly on such questions as how to deal with Salafist rivals, whether Ennahda should be a political party or a proselytising social movement, and whether to push for explicit mention of sharia law as a source of legislation in the new constitution. Preventing attacks on the sacred was a rallying point for the movement, a construction of both collective belonging and political identification.

At the local level, however, the picture was more confused. The politics of belonging within the local Ennahda community had been an important part of the movement’s self-identification in the decades before the uprising. Now, however, the boundaries of that identity were blurred. There was a striking sense that the acerbic political contest being fought out in the media and in party headquarters and political institutions in Tunis was a distraction from Ennahda’s original project of Islamisation, a project seen by local activists as moral and cultural more than political. Behind this lay a long-running anxiety that the cultural side of the movement had not been allowed to expand as fully as it should have and that there was much work still to do in explaining to Tunisian citizens the correct understanding of their religion. There was concern within the movement about the newly emerging signs of public piety. Where the hijab, for example, had been a symbol of political belonging for the members of the movement in the 1970s and 1980s, now it had lost that important dimension. The widespread adoption of the hijab from 2011 onwards signified not new support for Ennahda, but the pluralisation of Islamic identities flourishing in the new socio-political space.

One middle-aged female activist from Sousse, who in 2011 was an (unsuccessful) Ennahda election candidate, put it like this:

The hijab in the 1980s had a message, the idea of the MTI: that Islam could solve the problems of the contemporary world and that reviving Islam was like a method of life, a model of life in all fields. But the new generation are not like we were. Sometimes they have ideas totally against ours. They wear the hijab but their minds are interested in other things. They even go to nightclubs, but in the past you never imagined finding a girl in a nightclub dancing and wearing hijab. (Local Ennahda member 2014a)

This woman now spent her time giving lectures and classes to young women about how best they should understand their religion and the correct behaviour to which they should aspire. There was a sense here that the carefully constructed identity of the 1980s had been diluted in the competition from new religious actors. Where once Ennahda had seemed to dominate as a spokesman for a universal religious project, now its community, only freshly recovering from two decades of repression, found itself struggling to specify exactly what it was about the movement that made it stand apart in the newly crowded marketplace of religious entrepreneurs. It quickly became clear that Ennahda was failing to recruit a new generation in the numbers it had expected. Instead, young Tunisians were either distrustful of a religious-political project or, if they were religiously minded, often drawn instead to the nascent Salafist groups, with their sharper slogans, clearer, absolute vision of an Islamic state under sharia law, and their programmes of social outreach. At a local level, Ennahda remained dominated by middle-aged former prisoners, who sought to balance democratic commitments with moral and ethical comportment. Typical of this was one local Ennahda activist in Hammam Sousse, a school teacher and former prisoner who was 50 at the moment of the uprising. His sense of identity was as a moral compass:

I am Muslim, committed to convictions and principles that came with Islam and at the same time I am a democrat and live in the twenty-first century. There must be a base to rely on. There must be something so you don’t become disrupted. If you don’t have a dimension in your personality that goes back to the Islamic fundamentals you can be derailed. (Local Ennahda member 2014a)

However, these individuals recognised that this moral code was now less distinctive to Ennahda. Many had seen young potential recruits drawn away towards Salafism, or had argued with newly arrived Salafist preachers in their own mosques, who accused Ennahda of conceding ground to secularists in elite-level political compromises and of straying from the religious project. ‘The movement has a cultural project, but it couldn’t achieve it,’ said the head of one of the local Ennahda bureaux in Sousse. ‘The cultural question takes time and it’s not done in a year, or two or three or four. It will take more time and that’s why this side of the project didn’t get its full chance’ (Local Ennahda Leader 2014). Beyond the elite-level politics of the capital, rebuilding the community of belonging was much harder in the new post-2011 context.
Ennahdha won the first post-uprising elections, on 23 October 2011, taking 89 out of 217 seats in the assembly and forming a coalition government with two allies, the CPR and Etatkal. Their task was to write a new constitution, which after much debate, negotiation, redrafting and compromise, not to mention criticism from an increasingly impatient press and public, was eventually completed in January 2014. The process recalled the writing of the first post-independence constitution under Bourguiba in 1959, not just practically but also intellectually, for it revived unresolved battles over historical memory (Zemmni 2015, 3). Ennahdha’s attempt to construct a consensus of public opinion in favour of Arab-Islamic identity was its engagement in the latest stage of this battle over symbolic production and, ultimately, national identity.

In the months before the election, several of Ennahdha’s opponents in the High Authority pushed through a ‘Republican Pact’, which seemed like an effort to mitigate an imminent Islamist victory. The pact insisted that the new Tunisian state would ensure the ‘separation of the religious from the political sphere’, ‘full equality of the sexes’ and would be based on ‘the values of modernity and progress’ (High Authority for the Realisation of the Objectives of the Revolution 2011). The document pushed Ennahdha to withdraw from the High Authority complaining it was an attempt to usurp the coming vote. The movement responded by writing its own draft constitution in early 2012, its opening negotiating position, in which it talked of a Tunisia that was committed to the ‘teachings of Islam’ and the ‘Arab-Islamic family’, and in which it proposed that sharia should be the main source of legislation, before retreating from that controversial suggestion in the face of widespread criticism (Ennahdha 2012). Again this was a nostalgic quest for a cultural authenticity that Bourguibaism had erred, an effort to reclaim the nation’s history, to reassert its historical memory. Now, however, this was no longer about identifying the movement solely in opposition to its critics but about laying down the framework for a much broader, reformed national conception of identity. Ennahdha in this period spoke continually of forging ‘consensus’, which meant not just striking compromises and agreements with other political parties over legal drafts and procedural arrangements, but building a unanimous, single-minded vision of the identity of the new Tunisia, and particularly of relations between state and society.

In large part, Ennahdha succeeded in framing the constitution in the way it had hoped, while at the same time securing near complete support during the final vote within the assembly. Ennahdha withdrew its early proposal over sharia, and dropped a later article that would have stipulated Islam as the religion of state. However, it did win mention of the attachment of Tunisians to the ‘teachings of Islam’ and ‘our Arab-Islamic identity’ in the preamble of the text. It also secured a role for the state in religious oversight, giving it the ambiguous power to protect and prevent harm to the undefined ‘sacred’, which was effectively an anti-blasphemy provision. Although this wording fell short of Ennahdha’s original demand to ‘criminalise all attacks on the sacred’, it still gave politicians and judges broad scope for interpretation at potential risk to the constitution’s commitments to freedom of speech and conscience. Ennahdha itself seemed to consider that the constitution brought a decisive end to the identity contest. As one member of Ennahdha’s Shura Council said:

We consider the issue is resolved. The new constitution confirms the Arab-Islamic identity of Tunisia, there was a vote on this and big agreement. And in terms of Tunisian society whoever is coming to deny Arab-Islamic identity will be seen as eccentric (shadhdh). ... We have an issue that is resolved and there is no debate about Arab-Islamic identity in Tunisia. (Shura Council member 2014)

This remarkable claim was true in as much as it became necessary for all political parties to submit to the new norm of political discourse, which required acknowledging and respecting the religious element of Tunisia’s national identity. Essebsi, the former interior minister from the Bourguiba years, led an anti-Ennahdha party to victory at the 2014 elections, but his speeches were peppered with religious references and his policies by no means sought to separate religion and the state. Even Hamma Hammami, the veteran communist leader, gave a television interview in November 2014, much noted by the Islamists, in which he insisted he was not an atheist and in which he endorsed Tunisia’s Arab-Islamic heritage.

However, although the constitutional text was a political achievement and symbolic of the gradual progress of the transition, it did not bring an end to polarising argument, nor lay any more than a passing claim to finalising the identity debate. If Bourguiba, a half-century earlier, had not ended this contest with his reforms, then the new constitution of 2014 did not mark a decisive conclusion either. After all, Essebsi continued to echo the polarised political discourse of the Bourguiba and Ben Ali regimes when he dismissed Ennahdha as a premodern throwback: ‘We know that fourteen centuries separate us from the Islamists. They dream of imposing a return to the seventh century, we want the twenty-first century’ (Royant and de Montesquieu 2015). Indeed, even within the ranks of Ennahdha, the constitutional drafting had revealed as much disagreement as unity, suggesting that the movement’s identity construction was now weaker than two decades earlier and masked rather serious internal differences. For example, even though Ghannouchi
claimed that the movement had agreed to renounce its demand that sharia law be a source of legislation, in fact in January 2014 as many as twenty-one of Ennahda’s eighty-nine originally elected deputies voted in favour of a failed amendment that would have made the Quran and Sunna (the teachings and sayings of the prophet) principle sources of legislation (Marsad 2014c). In other sessions, ten Ennahda deputies supported an amendment, eventually withdrawn before a vote, that would have criminalised attacks on the sacred and seventeen voted for a failed amendment that would have removed the protection for freedom of conscience (Marsad 2014a, b). Contrary to popular perception, Ennahda did not always vote as a loyal bloc. In fact, these voting patterns suggested divisions over the movement’s political vision and offered a rare public view into a growing internal debate about whether political participation had in fact weakened the movement’s original Islamisation project.

It was unclear to many of the movement’s own deputies whether Ennahda’s new identity was as a pragmatic political party, as some in the leadership seemed to want, or as an Islamising social movement which believed that religion still had a crucial role to play in shaping the contours of public life.

The October 2014 parliamentary election campaign was particularly revealing in the way it demonstrated the effect of this political professionalisation on the movement’s sense of its own identity. This was the second general election since the 2011 uprising and in those three years the political context had changed significantly. Although Ennahda had succeeded in overseeing the drafting of the constitution, it was forced out of government in January 2014 in a carefully negotiated departure brought on by a widespread sense of rising insecurity following the assassination of two prominent politicians in 2013. The Ennahda-led coalition was replaced by an appointed technocratic government and through 2014 it became increasingly clear that Essebsi’s Nidaa Touns party, with its ties to the former regime and its neo-Bourguibist positioning, would be Ennahda’s only serious challenger in the coming election. Ennahda’s campaign manifesto was entitled ‘Towards a rising economy and a secure country’, reflecting what it saw as the public’s twin concerns. What was most striking, particularly on the campaign trail with election candidates, was how little religion or identity was invoked. As one older female activist, wearing a hijab, said during one campaign outing: ‘They know we are Islamists without us having to say it. But the priorities now are economic and social’ (Local Ennahda member 2014a). So Ennahda candidates emphasised a promise of economic growth, a strong stand against terrorism, the need for a national unity government, increased state grants for students, longer maternity leave for women in the public sector and even the promise that expatriate Tunisians could send home two cars with tax relief rather than one. In Sousse, a step removed from the Tunis-focused media gaze, there was also an emphasis on local governance issues that had little to do with

religion – a promise of cleaner beaches, of an end to traffic congestion, and of greater tourist income by encouraging medical, corporate and cultural tourism ahead of cheap package beach holidays. Often the success of the constitution was held up as a point of pride and a sign of Ennahda’s willingness to work with other parties. The emphasis here was on Ennahda’s new readiness to be inclusive and to work with political competitors, in contrast to its experience in the late 1980s. As one female candidate from a prominent Ennahda family in the city, Affif Benakhoul, told a small crowd of a few hundred in the working-class district of 9 Avril in central Sousse:

We will succeed … and the biggest success is the constitution that we’ve done. The constitution is a point of pride for us, the constitution which fills us with pride, the constitution that is a consensus between Islam and modernity. There is a great story with this constitution, a story that we took from the path of the Prophet (peace be upon him): the path of consensus. We didn’t like to do a constitution alone in our name, we had the numbers to do it but we didn’t do that. We wanted a constitution for all Tunisians. (Makhoul 2014)

As in 2011, there was a clear effort to position themselves as populist. In Sousse, their campaign focused on working-class and lower middle-class areas and on small-scale events. Their supporters drove through the city in convoys waving flags, and walked through local markets shaking hands with shopkeepers. They spent many evenings knocking on doors, answering questions and explaining their political programme, and then held small rallies at which local candidates spoke to crowds of just a few hundred at a time. This was in contrast to rival parties, including Nidaa Touns, which opted for politics as spectacle, with larger, less frequent rallies that gathered thousands of supporters.

On the doorstep, Ennahda activists again skirted discussions of religion, instead positioning themselves clearly as the party that would continue working for the demands of the uprising and against the return of the old regime in new guises. One older male activist, campaigning near the Ghazi mosque in a lower middle-class district of Sousse, made his usual pitch to one household:

We’re in a hard situation now. You didn’t have right before to vote, now you do and you should use it. There are two forces in the country: the old regime and those like us with the revolution. We will apply the rule of law to all. (Local Ennahda member 2014b)

When voters asked them why so little had been done to reform the economy and provide jobs in the wake of the uprising, the activists often put the blame on the administration, saying it was still laden with former regime
bureaucrats who stalled Ennahdha's reforms. At the local level, this sense of the need to resist the return of the old regime was strongly held, as if the movement risked a return to the persecution it had suffered during the Ben Ali years. However, this local sense of defiance quickly ran up against the more conciliatory approach of the movement's leaders. After Nidaa Tounes won the parliamentary election in October 2014 and as the presidential campaign began, Ennahdha's leaders chose not to endorse their natural ally, the former president Moncef Marzouki, who was running against Nidaa Tounes' Essabbi for the presidency. Many ordinary Ennahdha members disagreed and voted in large numbers for Marzouki, in what one local Ennahdha leader, who later resigned his post in frustration, described as an angry message to their leaders. After Essabbi won, the Ennahdha leadership pushed hard to secure a role in the new coalition cabinet, eventually securing one ministry and three junior secretaries of state positions. However, for many within the movement, these two decisions, which favoured compromise and cooperation with Nidaa Tounes over outright competition, sat uncomfortably. One senior leader, Abdelhamid Jerassi, even briefly stepped down from the Executive Bureau in protest. At the local level, many long-time members of the movement, though they remained believers in the broader Ennahdha cause, distanced themselves from the movement's political apparatus to work instead on independent civil society projects, religious associations or charitable work. Once again, they argued that political goals, now prioritising an inclusive cross-party pragmatism even with the survivors of the former regime, seemed to outweigh the movement's religious, Islamising principles. These decisions further reinforced the sense among some that Ennahdha as a pragmatic political party ought to be separate from Ennahdha as a religious social movement, and underlined how diluted had become in its political and collective identity.

Those in favour of a separation of these two elements argued that the new context required Ennahdha to shed its skin as an underground movement of resistance to become a modern, technocratic, conservative political party with policies aimed at all voters, not Islamists alone. Islam would remain a moral guide, but without the implementation of sharia as a strict code of law. Proselytising and social work would be the responsibility of a separate movement working through mosque classes and charitable associations. However, others feared such a split might cut off the political party from its social base and bring into question the crucial comprehensive nature of the Islamist project, which since 1981 had sought to combine the religious and political. It was still unclear to many within the movement exactly what it might mean to be a conservative political party inspired by an Islamic reference. Although some saw the identity debate as having been resolved, in fact it was very much in question, even within the movement itself.

CONCLUSION

The identity-driven debates that dominated Tunisian politics in the months after the 2011 uprising may have seemed merely tactical but were in fact a revival of a historic political contest over symbols and their interpretation. A sense of identity described by the movement as a cultural authenticity, but which was just as much political and economic, had shaped Ennahdha's project since its earliest days. It had also served as the axis around which the movement forged a sense of connectedness: tight bonds reinforced by daily social practice and shared ethical commitments. However, that was transformed by two decades of repression and the sudden collapse of the Ben Ali regime in January 2011. While the movement had once been exclusive and isolated from its political allies, now it diluted its political agenda and began to seek out consensus and partnership in a new inclusivity. While it had previously held the monopoly on expressions of Islamic identity as a collective bond, now Ennahdha found itself as just one voice in a new pluralisation of Islam and unable to rebuild the same tight connectedness of shared social practice that had characterised the movement two decades earlier.

This experience reveals much about the shifting trajectories of Islamism. Initially, in the 1970s, the precursor to the Ennahdha movement had begun with a programme of grassroots mosque-led Islamisation. By the 1980s this, at least at the central level in Tunisia, became a political project, seeking to establish a new political order, while at the local level the cultural and moral campaign continued. The years of repression in the 1990s and 2000s saw both the political and the Islamising project almost entirely dismantled, or at least confined to individual acts of commitment. After 2011, in the context of new freedoms Ennahdha's more politically minded leaders positioned the movement as a party which needed to offer solutions to all Tunisia's problems: no longer just moral and cultural issues, but also the question of the limits of individual freedoms and the pressing urgency of socio-economic recovery, with policies that had to appeal to Islamists and non-Islamists alike. This transcending of the original project to establish some form of Islamic order is Bayat's "post-Islamist" turn, from exclusivism and a monopoly of religious truth to inclusion, flexibility in principles and practice, and ambiguity (Bayat 2013a). Amidst this new and dramatic shift in project, Ennahdha sought to cling to the notion of Arab-Islamic identity as an anchor that would hold the movement fast to its original principles even in a rapidly changing environment. However, the Ennahdha example reveals the limits of identity as a tool of social bonding. It became clear that the movement's latest evolution could not come without serious internal cleavages that loyalty to Arab-Islamic identity alone could not bridge. Even though this notion of identity was formally inscribed in the new constitution, that alone was not enough to define a
movement that suddenly faced free political competition, the pressing political, economic and social demands of a democratic transition, and an internal debate over its future direction.

The revival of an Arab-Islamic identification as a rallying cry masked internal divisions within the movement and the struggle to define a new political vision. What could the Islamic reference offer as solutions to the urgent socio-economic crisis that triggered the uprising? How could Ennahda lift itself out of its current ideological indistinctiveness? A recourse to broad, ambiguous conceptions of morality and a shared Islamic history marked only the beginning of the search for the right answers.

NOTES

1. Throughout the nationwide demonstrations which began in December 2010 one of the most common chants of Tunisian protesters was: ‘Work, Freedom, National Dignity!’ (shaqil, hurriyya, karama wataniyiyat).

2. The Zaytuna mosque-university in Tunis had been the country’s main centre of religious scholarship. As part of Bourguiba’s modernising and anti-clerical reforms Zaytuna was stripped of its independence in 1956 and placed under the Ministry of Education, reducing its size and influence, though Bourguiba still called on some Zaytuna scholars to endorse his reforms. In 1961, it became the faculty of theology at the newly established state-run University of Tunis.

Chapter 10

Conclusion

Shabnam J. Holliday and Philip Leech

The issue of identity was always a central theme of Edward Said’s analyses. His work challenged many of the deeply entrenched assumptions about identities that underlie and frame the way the non-European world has been presented in much of European cultural production. His intention was to expose not only the fallacy of these assumptions, and the mythologies that went along with them, but also – and more importantly – the asymmetrical structures of power that they propagate, support and seek to justify. Said was writing about the impact and legacy of European colonialism, yet while the surge of popular protests in the Middle East may signal the twilight of postcolonialism (see Dabashi 2012) there is still much to learn from his words here. In Culture and Imperialism (1994), Said argues:

No one today is purely one thing. Labels like Indian, or woman, or Muslim, or American are not more than starting-points, which if followed into actual experience for only a moment are quickly left behind. ... No one can deny the persisting continuities of long traditions, sustained habitations, national languages, and cultural geographies, but there seems no reason except fear and prejudice to keep insisting on their separation and distinctiveness, as if that was all human life was about. (Said 1994, 336)

How is it, then, that we should engage with Said and ‘think concretely and sympathetically, contrapuntally’ (Said 1994, 336) in the context of popular uprisings in the Middle East? Perhaps, his contention that ‘no one today is purely one thing’ is the most important. Indeed, as the contributions to this volume suggest, identities are best understood as multiple, in as much as any given individual may embody various different identities simultaneously. Further to this, in this volume we have explored political identities.