

## ANALYSIS PAPER



## SUMMARY

Defining religious identity in the Maghreb has become an urgent challenge for governments fighting violent extremism. Nowhere is the battle as intense as in Tunisia, which is struggling to reshape its religious identity after more than a half century of state-imposed secularism. Following its revolution in 2011, Tunisia's religious landscape was infiltrated by extremist preachers, and a surge in religiously inspired violence threatened Tunisia's fragile political transition. Some religious and political leaders called for promoting "traditional" Islam to fight extremism and boost central religious control. The outcome of this struggle in Tunisia to define traditional Islam, and the extent to which governments across North Africa can create viable religious alternatives to extremist narratives, will shape the next generation of Islamic values and determine whether violent extremism becomes further embedded in North African society or is pushed to the margins. ■

## The Struggle for Religious Identity in Tunisia and the Maghreb

by Haim Malka

In the final days of the eighteenth century, Wahhabi scholars sent a letter to religious scholars at Tunisia's Zaytouna Mosque, one of North Africa's oldest and most important centers of Islamic learning. The sharply worded letter accused Tunisians of straying from monotheism, a particularly serious charge, and called on them to embrace Wahhabism's puritanical creed. Zaytouna's scholars replied with a 10-page letter accusing the Wahhabis of hypocrisy and ignorance, while eloquently arguing that Tunisia's Islamic traditions were deeply rooted in the Qur'an and Sunna.<sup>1</sup>

That exchange, over two centuries ago, set in motion an ideological struggle in North Africa between local Islamic traditions and salafi and Wahhabi interpretations.<sup>2</sup> While traditional Maghreb Islam has a distinct regional flavor, salafism seeks to purify religious thought and practice from cultural and historical adaptations. It propounds an Islam based on the literal interpretation of the Qur'an and Sunna and on the practices of the "pious ancestors," or the first three generations of Muslims.<sup>3</sup>

Salafism, in both its violent and non-violent forms, represents a rebellion against local Islamic traditions and practices and their relationship to political systems. Though salafi interpretations have competed with North African Islamic traditions for centuries, this struggle has intensified since the Arab uprisings of 2011, which created public space for violent extremist ideology to spread and reignited a debate over how to fight it.

Some North African governments have responded to growing extremism by defining and promoting their own brand of "traditional" Islam. Their goal is to communicate and encourage not a "moderate" Islam, but an Islam that accepts state

### THE MAGHREB IN TRANSITION

While the Maghreb has long been at the margins of U.S. policy in the Middle East and North Africa, trends in this region increasingly reverberate throughout the Middle East. In this new environment, developments in the Maghreb will continue to have an impact both on the broader Middle East and on U.S. interests. The CSIS Middle East Program examines changing political, economic, and security trends in the Maghreb—defined here as Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya—through original research and analysis and by convening events that highlight issues of importance in the Maghreb to business and policymaking audiences. More broadly, the program focuses its research on the drivers of social and political change in the Middle East. For more information on the program's work on the Maghreb, visit <https://csis.org/program/maghreb>. ■

authority, and they have accordingly redoubled efforts to control religious space, both physical and ideological. Nowhere is the battle to define traditional Islam as intense as in Tunisia, which is struggling to reshape its religious identity after more than a half century of state-imposed secularism.<sup>4</sup>

While the U.S. government has sought to counter violent extremism partly by promoting liberal democratic values including separation of religion and state, governments in the region are promoting religion as a way to curb violent extremism while simultaneously bolstering their own political legitimacy. Their approach is based on the assumption that religion is an integral part of Maghreb society, and they are following a centuries-old practice of trying to centralize control of religion. In the new post-Arab uprising political environment, this effort to articulate a credible alternative to extremism and control religious space has become especially urgent.

## ISLAM IN TUNISIA AND THE MAGHREB

Rulers and governments have historically sought to control and define religion as a way to bolster legitimacy and obedience. By controlling the ulema and religious discourse, rulers in the Muslim world have attempted both to create a religious establishment that legitimizes political authority and to shape religious subjects who obey that authority. Across the Maghreb, the Maliki school of jurisprudence, one of Sunni Islam's four schools of law, plays an important role in government efforts to centralize religious authority.<sup>5</sup> Malikism accepts the importance of local social and political context. In practice this has meant that Maliki jurisprudence coexists with local cultural practices and traditions, most importantly Sufism.<sup>6</sup>

Sufism has a long tradition in the Maghreb.<sup>7</sup> Western descriptions typically characterize Sufism as Islamic mysticism that preaches nonviolence. While Sufis generally seek a deeper meaning in their religious practice, their outlooks and teachings vary dramatically. Sufis are typically organized around different brotherhoods led by a master or sheikh, who demands complete obedience from his followers. Thus religious interpretation is highly personalized among different Sufi orders depending on the sheikh. In the past, some Sufis wrote love poetry and drank wine, while others were warriors. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Sanussi brotherhood in eastern Libya waged war against French expansion and later Italian colonization.

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Algeria's famed Sufi leader Emir Abdel Qadir fought the French for more than a decade. Variations within Sufism highlight the fragmentation of authority in Islam; a Sufi sheikh both passes knowledge to his followers and acts as a parallel source of authority to state ulema (though historically it is not unusual for Sufi sheikhs to be integrated into the state ulema).

For hundreds of years the Maghreb boasted some of the greatest centers of Islamic learning, including Fes's Karaouine Mosque and Tunis's Zaytouna Mosque.<sup>8</sup> Both served as universities as well as mosques, and (like Cairo's al Azhar) they awarded advanced degrees in religious fields of study as well as a range of secular subjects, including physical sciences. Karaouine and Zaytouna sat at the crossroads of the medieval Islamic, Christian, and Jewish worlds, and they were instrumental not only in transmitting advanced scientific knowledge to Europe but also in promoting Maliki Islam.

The decline of the Ottoman Empire in most of North Africa<sup>9</sup> and the advent of European colonization undermined the region's traditional religious institutions. But in Tunisia, it was the independence movement led by the country's first president, Habib Bourguiba, in the 1950s that imposed state secularism and broke the power and influence of Zaytouna. Bourguiba overhauled Tunisia's religious institutions, neutered the power of the ulema (in part by confiscating all land endowments, or *habous* property<sup>10</sup>), and depoliticized religion by reducing Islamic education and practice to a bland emphasis on ritual. Mosques were locked except during prayer times, and libraries were emptied or shuttered. Most importantly, Bourguiba's government dismantled Tunisia's prestigious seat of learning and transferred Zaytouna's educational functions to the University of Tunis.<sup>11</sup> Religious education was transformed from a theological

discipline to an academic one. For the next half century, the state security apparatus tightly controlled Tunisian Islam and religious education.<sup>12</sup>

Despite this strict regulation, Tunisia and other North African states were not immune from salafism and other external ideological influences. In the 1970s and 1980s, workers who returned from the Gulf with savings also brought back stricter Islamic practices and ideas. Wealthy Gulf donors supported local charities, mosques, and schools that promoted salafi teachings. Arabization policies in education during the 1980s also attracted teachers from Egypt, the Levant, and the Gulf who often brought salafi and Islamist ideology. With the introduction of satellite television programs and then the Internet, charismatic sheikhs from Egypt and the Gulf could take their sometimes violent messages directly into people's homes. Thus when the Ben Ali regime collapsed in 2011, salafi and jihadi-salafi ideologies had been percolating in Tunisia for decades. Salafists presented people with a coherent set of ideas and actions, while traditional Tunisian and Maliki Islamic values had long been neglected or discredited.

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Salafists can be understood primarily as “religious and social reformers who are engaged in creating and reproducing particular forms of authority and identity, both personal and communal.”<sup>13</sup> They seek to recreate the religiopolitical community of the Prophet Muhammad. Ultraconservative in their outlook and puritanical in their religious practice, they are confident that their understanding of Islam is the correct one. They place great emphasis on what is permissible (*halal*) or impermissible (*haram*) in daily life. While salafists seek to establish a pious state based on Islamic law, they are often divided into three distinct yet overlapping categories: scripturalists, who focus primarily on spiritual outreach, charity, and education; political salafists, who actively contest modern elections; and jihadi-salafists, who

emphasize violence to defend Muslim communities under threat.<sup>14</sup> This third category spawned movements such as al Qaeda, which seek to use violence to overthrow governments in order to reestablish an Islamic caliphate.

Each of these three broad categories contains more fissures. Moreover, the lines between the categories are increasingly blurry, as scripturalist and jihadi streams adopt political activism to spread their message. Both nonviolent and violent forms of salafism pose a threat to governments, though the threats are different (if occasionally overlapping): one is primarily a social and political threat to the status quo, while the other is largely a security threat.

## AFTER THE ARAB UPRISINGS

Jihadi-salafi groups thrived in Tunisia after the Ben Ali government fell in January 2011. They swiftly took advantage of political uncertainty, ideological freedom, and porous borders to expand both their capabilities and area of operations. Jihadi-salafists also found thousands of potential leaders, activists, and recruits after a post-revolution prison amnesty program released prisoners who had been arrested under Tunisia's 2003 antiterrorism law.<sup>15</sup> As they adapted, jihadi-salafists went in two different directions. One stream pursued al Qaeda's traditional strategy of direct violence against security forces and symbols of the state, carried out by organized bands of fighters holed up in the wilderness.<sup>16</sup> The second combined violent ideology with social and political activism as part of an effort to reach more mainstream audiences. This approach prioritized religious outreach, often through social work, and it grew directly out of the revolutionary fervor and political openings that were part of the Arab uprisings. Ansar al Shari'a—whose founder, Seifallah Ben Hassine (Abu Iyadh al-Tunsi), was among the prisoners released under Tunisia's 2011 amnesty program—was the largest and most organized group representing this approach. These two distinct trends share the common goal of promoting a more conservative religious social code, legislation tied to Islamic law, and establishing an Islamic state.

The growth of both strains of jihadi-salafism poses a particular challenge to Tunisia as the country transitions to a system of representative government. Until the 2011 revolution, Tunisia had largely been shielded from the extremist violence that had plagued neighboring Algeria and the rest of the region over the last few decades. As Tunisia was

writing its new constitution, extremist violence heightened tensions between secularists and political Islamists in the debate over the role of religion in society.<sup>17</sup> It also highlighted deeper debates and fissures between different Islamist streams within Tunisian society, most importantly political Islamists and nonviolent salafists.

Throughout most of 2011–2012, Tunisian jihadi-salafists largely avoided confronting security forces and instead focused on organization and recruitment. They sought to impose their moral values through demonstrations and intimidation of academics, artists, and liberal activists. They restricted their use of violence to vigilante attacks against individuals and property, including destruction of Sufi shrines and mausoleums, which they consider elements of *shirk*, or polytheism.<sup>18</sup>

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Tunisia’s Ennahda-led government<sup>19</sup> seemed ambivalent about extremism and responded slowly to the growing threat of jihadi-salafism for a combination of political and ideological reasons. In part, Ennahda’s political leadership sought to co-opt salafists, presumably with a goal of winning their electoral support. Moreover, as an Islamist movement that had itself been persecuted for decades, it was difficult for Ennahda to contemplate harassing other Islamists. Many within Ennahda viewed young salafi and jihadi-salafi activists as wayward or rebellious sons who needed to be handled delicately. More broadly, Ennahda as a movement included a conservative salafi faction that sympathized with and sought to protect young salafi and jihadi-salafi activists.<sup>20</sup>

By mid-2013, Ennahda’s inclusive strategy had become a political liability. A string of violent attacks, including two political assassinations in 2013, and deepening political polarization forced Ennahda to alter its calculations and approach.<sup>21</sup> A new interior minister, Lotfi Ben Jeddou, pursued a more targeted counterterrorism push against militant

individuals and bases, devoting additional resources and manpower. As the counterterrorism effort expanded, the effort to control religious space also intensified.

## TRADITIONAL ISLAM AND STATE CONTROL

As the strongest political force, Ennahda led the effort to redefine traditional Tunisian Islam while it headed the government. Ennahda leaders emphasized the Maliki madhhab as the core of Tunisian Islam and led government efforts to regulate mosques, appoint imams, and control religious discourse.<sup>22</sup> This effort fit with another one of Ennahda’s goals: correcting the “historic mistake” (as political Islamists refer to it) of imposing secularization after independence. Promoting traditional Islam also became a tool to constrain scripturalist and political salafists who posed a political challenge in pushing for more conservative clauses in the constitution, as well as the jihadi-salafists who had become a security threat and a political liability.<sup>23</sup>

The struggle to promote traditional Islam has a bureaucratic and institutional component as well as an ideological one. On the institutional level, Ennahda moved to assert control over Tunisia’s 5,000 mosques and combat what the minister of religious affairs at the time described as “chaos in the mosques.”<sup>24</sup> When the interim government took office in November 2011, nongovernment preachers controlled approximately one-fifth of all mosques.<sup>25</sup> Some preachers had appointed themselves and had no formal religious training or credentials, while others espoused violence and jihadi-salafi ideology.<sup>26</sup> According to a senior advisor to the minister of religious affairs, after the revolution many mosque preachers appointed by the old regime were either evicted from their communities or dismissed, though some were reappointed, and over 1,000 imams appointed themselves to positions within mosques.<sup>27</sup> Many of Ennahda’s replacement appointments were filled by scripturalist salafi and conservative preachers loyal to Ennahda.<sup>28</sup> According to one preacher, Ennahda used its power not only to root out jihadi-salafism but more broadly to suppress any religious ideas that did not conform to its positions.<sup>29</sup>

How many mosques were controlled by jihadi-salafists is difficult to ascertain. A Reuters article claims that “radicals took over around 1,000 mosques,” but it fails to define “radical.”<sup>30</sup> What is more likely is that these mosques were taken over by a combination of salafists, jihadi-salafists,

and nonaffiliated preachers or people who appointed themselves as preachers. According to the minister of religious affairs at the time, approximately 400 mosques were taken over by salafists, with 50 of those controlled by jihadi-salafists.<sup>31</sup> The actual numbers were likely higher, given that the government sought to downplay its lack of control. Certainly there are many more mosques where jihadi-salafists give classes or lead prayers informally, though there are no accurate estimates of how many. There are also private, unlicensed mosques in Tunisia, where the Ministry of Religious Affairs has no oversight of the preachers. According to Ministry of Interior officials, approximately 150 mosques currently remain under the control of jihadi-salafists.<sup>32</sup>

As a result, exerting central control over Tunisia's mosques—both as a way to influence religious values and explicitly to counter jihadi-salafi ideology—has taken on increased significance.<sup>33</sup> As it cracked down on jihadi-salafi activity, Ennahda realized it needed to reestablish centralized control over the appointment of preachers and over the messages they disseminated, primarily during classes and Friday communal prayers. The Ministry of Religious Affairs appointed a commission to address the issue and used a combination of police, legal, and bureaucratic actions to reassert authority. The day-to-day efforts to reshape the religious landscape unfolded primarily within the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Ministry of Higher Education. The Ministry of Religious Affairs is responsible for appointing mosque imams or prayer leaders, monitoring the messages preached in mosques, and approving the criteria for qualifying religious scholars and imams, while the Ministry of Higher Education oversees the religious studies department at the University of Tunis.

## ZAYTOUNA'S ROLE

The Zaytouna Mosque's role and legacy is at the center of the struggle over Tunisian Islam. Though Zaytouna has been stripped of its past glory, it remains a national symbol, and it has strong brand appeal.<sup>34</sup> Most Tunisians, including secular Tunisians, take great pride in Zaytouna's history, and the mosque plays an important role in Tunisian identity. While there is a broad consensus across the religious spectrum that Zaytouna should be revived as part of the effort to counter violent extremism, few agree on the roles and functions Zaytouna should assume or the curriculum it should teach.

A key question dividing Tunisians is whether Zaytouna should remain solely a mosque or should resume its function as a university. The question is not merely one of institutional status; it also concerns the important issue of how religion is taught in Tunisia. For the last half century religion has been taught as an academic subject by university professors. Mosques did not provide classes or educational instruction, as they do in other parts of the Islamic world. Thus restoring Zaytouna's status as a university would symbolize rejection of the secularization carried out under Bourguiba and would restore Islamic study in Tunisia to a religious framework.

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Many political Islamists affiliated with Ennahda and more conservative elements within Tunisian society wish to revive Zaytouna as a mosque-university that awards degrees. Some religious scholars who were appointed under the Ennahda government have proposed that the Zaytouna Mosque focus on religious and theological sciences as well as *da'wa*.<sup>35</sup> Reviving Zaytouna's educational role could give the ulema overseeing the Zaytouna Mosque considerable influence over the religious sphere, since it would involve controlling a nationwide network of charities, associations, mosques, and preachers. Before independence, Zaytouna had branches across Tunisia, and reopening those branches would give religious scholars more outlets for promoting religious education throughout the country.

With the mosque under the control of the Ministry of Religious Affairs and religious studies administered by the Ministry of Higher Education, Zaytouna is also the object of a bureaucratic turf battle. Under the first two Ennahda governments, the Ministry of Religious Affairs, headed by Nourredine al-Khademi, made no secret of wanting to take control of the religious studies department at the University of Tunis. Such a move would be problematic, however, since the professors at the university are not religious

scholars or sheikhs but professors of religious studies.<sup>36</sup>

Many secular-minded Tunisians as well as devout Tunisians who want to separate religion from politics fear that reviving Zaytouna as a university could create an education system parallel to the secular one, which would be shaped and politicized by more conservative religious scholars. The imam of the Zaytouna Mosque, Sheikh Hussein Obeidi, has expressed intolerant views and incited violence in the past, though he has kept his post.<sup>37</sup> Disputes over control of Zaytouna, its function, and its outlook will remain a source of tension among a range of religious actors for the foreseeable future. The stakes of this struggle are high. Given Zaytouna's historical importance in Tunisian national identity, whoever controls the religious outlook and doctrine of Zaytouna will have considerable influence in shaping religious values across the country.

## ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVES

Though Ennahda has led the efforts described above, the struggle to define traditional Tunisian Islam and the battle against jihadi-salafi ideology transcend any single political or religious movement. A variety of political and religious actors increasingly see Tunisian Islam, which draws on the country's rich history and religious legacy, as an integral component of combatting extremist ideology. In interviews with a wide range of religious and political actors—including political Islamists and Ennahda leaders,<sup>38</sup> state-employed imams,<sup>39</sup> Sufis, and salafi leaders<sup>40</sup> sympathetic to jihadi-salafists—all affirmed the importance of reviving and promoting Malikism and Tunisian Islam to combat extremism. While their approaches to reviving a Tunisian Islamic brand had elements in common, they diverged over the theological and structural approaches that define traditional Tunisian Islam, as well as over the definition of extremism. This debate is being carried out among religious scholars and political leaders, but it will shape the religious values that are taught and promoted in Tunisia's schools and mosques.

Sufis are among those who hold that developing an appealing Tunisian Islam is the key to fighting terrorism and extremism. Tunisia has a long tradition of Sufism, and currently 10 to 15 large Sufi orders are active in the country. Though Sufis have generally been apolitical in Tunisia, they are active in this debate. According to their view, Tunisian

Islam is based on Maliki jurisprudence, Ash'ari theology, and Sufism. Sufis, like many other Tunisians, talk of restoring Zaytouna as a center of learning, but they want to keep religion and politics separate, arguing that politics corrupts religion and creates divisions within society.<sup>41</sup>

Sufis feel threatened not only by salafists and jihadi-salafists, but by Ennahda as well. Some Sufi sheikhs and their supporters argue that Ennahda is actually a salafi movement, and that the movement is dishonest about its embrace of the Maliki school of law.<sup>42</sup> They argue that after the revolution, Ennahda made an alliance with salafists that gave them freedom to organize and preach in mosques. While Sufis' concerns about Ennahda are understandable and not without basis, the Ennahda movement includes some who embrace a form of Sufism.<sup>43</sup>

Critics claim that Sufis are unorganized, fragmented, and naïve, with an overly simplistic message of tolerance. Organizationally, Sufis are dispersed, as they follow individual sheikhs and lack a more centralized structure. Were Sufis to unite to form a more coherent religious or political force (admittedly an unlikely development under current circumstances), they could become a stronger constituency within Tunisian religious circles and have more influence over Tunisia's evolving religious national identity.

## MOROCCO'S EXPERIENCE: THE KING AND THE FAITHFUL

Tunisia has not been alone in its effort to redefine traditional local Islam. In the last decade, Morocco has pursued a comprehensive strategy to define Moroccan Islam, largely through the palace's initiative. The strategy aims to provide an alternative to extremist ideology and strengthen the religious and political legitimacy of the monarch. Morocco launched two series of reforms, one in 2004 and another in 2008, to regulate and amend the religious sector. Tunisia's history and political structure are of course different from Morocco's, but as Tunisia pursues its own redefinition of traditional Islam, Morocco's experience can provide important insight. Morocco's experiences illustrate the extent of government efforts to control religious space as well as their limitations.

Morocco's efforts focus on promoting the Maliki madhhab, Ash'ari theology, and Sufism. In Morocco, Islamic identity

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is closely tied to the monarchy as a pillar of Moroccan stability; the king is both a temporal ruler and the commander of the faithful (*amir al-mu'minin*), which makes him the highest religious authority in the country.<sup>44</sup> Since independence, Morocco's kings have attempted to simultaneously strengthen their religious legitimacy and separate religion from politics as a way to prevent political opponents from harnessing religion for political purposes. Political parties based on religion are banned by law.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, the king's oversight of religion is enshrined in the constitution and reinforced by the *bay'a*, or oath of allegiance, which high-ranking officials, including ulema, annually swear in the king's presence.

The bureaucratic component of Morocco's strategy focuses on controlling the territory where extremist ideology exists. Hoping to create a Moroccan Islam that can compete with political Islamists, salafists, and extremists, state religious institutions seek to make mosques and imams more accessible and to extend the guidance and services they offer. The Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs leads this effort and is charged with registering and licensing mosques, religious schools, and religious charities and endowments. It also appoints imams, who along with other mosque workers are public employees on the government payroll.<sup>46</sup>

Mosques are monitored by the Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs in coordination with the Ministry of Interior.<sup>47</sup> With over 50,000 mosques spread across the country, this is a massive effort, and some religious scholars concede that pockets of extremism exist in state mosques where imams resist state efforts to reform religious curricula and practices.<sup>48</sup> In 2009 the ministry dismissed 765 imams for incompetence. An additional 34 imams were dismissed for violating the ban on participating in political

events, despite the fact that the state religious apparatus is occasionally mobilized to endorse specific political objectives.<sup>49</sup>

Morocco is also reforming and regulating the content of religious education. It has established religious councils such as the League of Mohammedan Scholars to promote dialogue on religious issues and support curriculum reform in religious education. Moreover, the state has attempted to regulate fatwas, or legal rulings. It created a single religious body with the authority to issue religious judgments, the Higher Council of Ulemas, which is headed by the king. It has also started reforming curricula used to train imams and religious scholars. In 2006 the Ministry of Religious Affairs produced a training manual for imams, laying out the principles of Moroccan Islam.<sup>50</sup> Some imams have pushed back against these reforms, and in 2011–2012 they held demonstrations to protest intervention in the content of sermons.<sup>51</sup> According to officials within the Ministry of Religious Affairs, the ministry occasionally provides guidance on certain topics for Friday sermons, though other reports suggest that at times a single approved sermon text is distributed to mosques across the country.<sup>52</sup>

Morocco's strategy extends beyond its borders. The government sees promoting the tenets of Maliki Islam to Moroccans living abroad—in Europe, the Sahel, and West Africa—as an important component of its foreign policy that will reinforce domestic stability. Morocco has a long history of spreading Islamic practice and values in West Africa, where the Maliki school of law is dominant.<sup>53</sup> Morocco is also pursuing plans to train imams in Mali, Guinea, Tunisia, and Libya, and it helped to create the Council of Moroccan Ulema in Europe to serve and promote Maliki Islam among Moroccan expatriates.<sup>54</sup>

In general, Morocco seeks to depoliticize religion and to prevent political opposition from using religion against the king. Simultaneously, however, it has integrated political Islamists into formal politics—on the condition that they recognize the king's religious authority. In the 1990s, while Islamists fought a violent insurgency with the Algerian government and faced crackdowns in Tunisia and Libya, Islamists in Morocco were integrated into parliamentary politics. The most important Islamist group, the Justice and Development Party, won parliamentary elections in 2011 and formed a coalition government.

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Morocco has also worked to delegitimize and co-opt extremists by reaching accommodations with well-known jihadi-salafi sheikhs, partially through dialogue in the prisons. In 2011 the king pardoned several jihadi-salafi preachers arrested after the 2003 Casablanca bombings, including Mohammed Fizazi, who had been sentenced to 30 years in prison for his links to the attacks. Two years earlier, Fizazi had written an open letter to his daughter in Germany distancing himself from violence.<sup>55</sup> Some jihadi-salafi leaders, including Fizazi, have publicly declared their support for the monarchy.<sup>56</sup> Remarkably, in March 2014 King Mohammed VI attended Friday prayers led by Fizazi at a mosque in Tangiers. The prayers and Fizazi's sermon were broadcast on television.<sup>57</sup>

Rehabilitating and integrating jihadi-salafists like Fizazi further fragments potential religious and political opposition, but it is not without risks. Legitimizing former extremists like Fizazi may do more to advance his appeal than that of state religious authorities. Regardless of whether rehabilitated jihadi-salafists decide to enter politics or remain apolitical, they will remain a part of Morocco's religious and potentially political landscape. It is too early to determine how successful Morocco has been in deradicalizing and reintegrating former violent extremists. Unforeseen trends are likely to emerge in the future. The war in Syria, in particular, is attracting and radicalizing a new generation of Moroccans and young men from across the region, signaling that the struggle remains an uphill battle.<sup>58</sup>

The main exception to Morocco's integration strategy remains al-Adl wal-Ihsan (Justice and Charity), a popular grassroots Islamic movement that rejects the king's political and religious legitimacy, and therefore does not participate in parliamentary politics. The movement seeks to create a new political and social order in Morocco, though it rejects violence as a strategy. Until his death in 2012 the move-

ment was led by Abdessalam Yassine, whose writings and sermons were a unique blend of Sufi and salafi elements. Youth affiliated with the movement originally participated in the 20 February movement demonstrations that erupted in early 2011, and Yassine's death raised the question of whether the movement would seek to enter formal politics. For the moment, al-Adl wal-Ihsan continues to reject the Moroccan political system. Yet its future decisions will affect Morocco's religious and political landscape.

## CHALLENGES OF CREATING NATIONAL ISLAMIC IDENTITY

Though Morocco and Tunisia share a similar approach to reforming and regulating religious ideology and space, there are important differences. Morocco's modern national identity has been shaped in part by Islam, while Tunisia's imposed secularization after independence weakened religious identity. Morocco has a strong advantage because it has a central religious figure—the king—to guide and shape religious policy. The king claims religious legitimacy and has the full resources of the state at his disposal. Tunisia, however, not only lacks a strong central authority, but faces polarizing politics that complicate efforts to centralize religious authority.

The struggle to redefine traditional Tunisian Islam remains highly politicized and contested by a range of actors. Competition between Ennahda, secular political forces, and salafists means that no single actor can determine religious policy and what messages are propagated. Ennahda will remain a strong political force in Tunisia, but its ability to independently shape religious policy will depend on its participation in government and its future control of key ministries, including Religious Affairs and Higher Education. This means that Tunisia's Islamic identity and the role of religion in Tunisian society will remain contested for the foreseeable future.

Morocco, by contrast, seeks to depoliticize religion by preserving the monarchy's monopoly on religious authority and legitimacy. While some religious and political forces (such as the Justice and Charity movement) reject the king's religious role, he nonetheless has the tools, institutions, and resources to promote a unified Islamic interpretation through state-funded mosques, foundations, and research institutions.



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

Part of the problem is also a generation gap and communication gap between the older ulema and young people. Jihadi-salafi preachers, on the other hand, appeal to disenfranchised youth who are looking for order and meaning in their lives. They preach about injustice, humiliation, and inequality, and they provide means for young people to take action. They understand what motivates young people and focus on education and social work, which is empowering for many young people who feel marginalized.

**State ulema seek to inculcate respect for authority, but that message is largely out of step with the mood of North Africa, where society and politics have been permeated with the rebelliousness of the Arab uprisings.**

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

Marketing and messaging are also important components of spreading traditional Islamic values. Governments in the region have increased state-run religious television and radio programming to compete with preachers from the Gulf and Egypt found on satellite television. Morocco has a state-run television station (*Assadissa*) devoted solely to re-

ligious programming and specifically to promoting Moroccan Islam. Tunisia is also developing locally-based religious programming. The challenge is that state-run television is generally dull compared to the more fiery programming available on the Internet or by satellite. State ulema seek to inculcate respect for authority, but that message is largely out of step with the mood of North Africa, where society and politics have been permeated with the rebelliousness of the Arab uprisings.

## LOOKING FORWARD

Tunisia's struggle to redefine its religious identity is just beginning. The new constitution addresses only broadly the role of religion in society. It cannot resolve complicated ideological and institutional divisions that will shape the future religious landscape. That task will be left to competing religious and political actors.

Tunisia's experience mirrors a broader religious contest throughout the region over controlling religious space. How governments define and promote their version of traditional Islam will have far-reaching implications for their own stability and for the region as a whole. As governments regulate religious space they must strike a balance between promoting their own values and repressing other nonviolent interpretations, most importantly salafism.<sup>59</sup> Salafism has existed in some form in the Maghreb for centuries, and it is likely to remain a social, religious, and (potentially) political force.

Past repression has tended to strengthen Islamist groups' appeal, and renewed government harassment could encourage more young people to embrace violence. Both Morocco and Tunisia appear to understand that some freedom of action for nonviolent salafists is unavoidable. To the extent that salafists choose to participate in formal politics, this will pose further challenges across the region for both governments and other Islamist political parties.

For the moment, depoliticizing the struggle to shape religious identity is crucial. Tunisia in particular runs the risk that politics will complicate the religious debate, not only resulting in greater political polarization, but also undermining efforts to rebuild traditional Tunisian Islam.

Reviving and promoting local traditional Islam is a long-term process. It requires bureaucratic efforts to control

mosques, revise religious curricula, and train imams and religious leaders who can connect with young people. More broadly, success requires that state-sponsored ulema and religious curricula address people's spiritual needs as well as their daily struggles.

For the United States, debates over religious identity in the region pose deep challenges precisely because there is no obvious U.S. role in that debate. Yet a deeper understanding of the forces at play is critical. Governments in the region seek to deradicalize their populations by making them more religious, not less. They are integrating salafists and others whose ideologies and values often directly conflict with those of the United States. If the U.S. government endorses particular religious interpretations over others, it risks provoking a backlash and undermining scholars and institutions that promote tolerance over violence. Ultimately, people in the region must determine which voices are acceptable in their societies. Governments are betting that more controlled religious messaging can ultimately produce populations that are less rebellious and prone to political violence. It is a gamble, the outcome of which will help determine the religious values of the next generation in the region and profoundly influence society and politics well into the future. ■

## NOTES

1. For the full text and English translation of the Tunisian response see *In Quest of Islamic Humanism*, ed. A. H. Green (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1984), 155–77.

2. Salafism and Wahhabism are overlapping yet distinct movements, though the terms are often used interchangeably. In interviews conducted by the author in Tunisia in November 2013, many subjects used the term Wahhabi to describe extremist tendencies that originated outside of Tunisia. For clarity this article will use the term salafi throughout.

3. For a detailed description and definition of salafism, see Bernard Haykel, “On the Nature of Salafi Thought and Action,” in *Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement*, ed. Roel Meijer (London: Hurst, 2009), 33–57.

4. Some Tunisians also refer to traditional Tunisian Islam as “Zaytouni” Islam, referring to the Zaytouna Mosque's legacy.

5. Malikism is a school of law based on the teachings of Imam Malik bin Anas, who died at the end of the eighth century in Medina. Malikism prioritizes the hadiths of the Medinan period and the “companions of the Prophet” over other parts of the Sunna. It also accepts that the context of time and place must be part of *ijtihad*, or the interpretation of issues not directly addressed in the Qur'an and Hadith; this position is not unique but is accepted in principle by other schools of law. For a detailed description see

“Mālikiyya,” *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., ed. P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C. E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, and W. P. Heinrichs, Brill Online, 2014, [http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/malikiyya-COM\\_0652](http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/malikiyya-COM_0652).

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

7. Over the centuries in North Africa, Sufism intertwined with the folk practice of venerating the tombs of holy men (and in some cases women). These holy men, who often led Sufi brotherhoods, were believed to possess *baraka*, or blessing, which allowed them not only to perform miracles but to intercede and help lift one's prayers to God. This practice was also common among the Jewish communities of North Africa. For a more complete description of *baraka* see Clifford Geertz, *Islam Observed* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 44–45.

8. The Karaouine Mosque, established in the middle of the ninth century, is recognized by UNESCO as the world's oldest university. See “Medina of Fez,” UNESCO World Heritage List, <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/170>. The Zaytouna Mosque dates from the early eighth century and is recognized as the second mosque built in North Africa.

9. Morocco was never part of the Ottoman Empire.

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

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

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

13. Haykel, “On the Nature of Salafi Thought and Action,” 34–35.

14. For a detailed analysis of hybrid jihadi-salafism and efforts to combine extremist ideology with social and political activism, see Haim Malka and William Lawrence, “Jihadi-Salafism's Next Generation,” CSIS, October 2013, <http://csis.org/publication/jihadi-salafisms-next-generation>.

15. According to a United Nations Human Rights Council report, “A total of 8,700 people benefited from this amnesty law either by being released from prison or – in the broad majority of cases – by being restored their political rights.” See Report of the U.N. Special Rapporteur on human rights and terrorism, Mission to Tunisia, March 14, 2012, U.N. doc. A/HRC/20/14/Add. 1, [http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/RegularSession/Session20/A-HRC-20-14-Add1\\_en.pdf](http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/RegularSession/Session20/A-HRC-20-14-Add1_en.pdf).

16. By mid-2012, a jihadi-salafi group called the Okba ibn Nafaa Brigade had established a base in the Chaambi Mountains on the Tunisian-Algerian border and had launched a number of

attacks against security forces. This group, made up of both Tunisians and Algerians, is believed to have cooperated with elements of al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb's northern emirate. Its primary objective appears to have been to undermine Tunisia's political transition by creating a chaotic and insecure environment.

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

18. In January 2013, for example, salafists were accused of setting fire to the mausoleum of Sidi Bou Said, a Sufi sheikh buried near Tunis. See Roua Seghaier, "Thirty-Four Mausoleums in Tunisia Vandalized Since the Revolution," *Tunisia Live*, <http://www.tunisia-live.net/2013/01/24/thirty-four-mausoleums-in-tunisia-vandalized-since-the-revolution/#sthash.WJM2h0mQ.dpuf>.

19. Harakat Ennahda ("the Renaissance Movement") grew out of opposition to former president Habib Bourguiba's secularizing reforms. Rachid Ghannouchi, an intellectual, founded the Mouvement de la Tendance Islamique (MTI) in 1981 as an independent social and political movement similar to Muslim Brotherhood groups in other 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 pursued an aggressive counterterrorism strategy and consolidated power, and Ghannouchi lived in exile from 1988 to 2011. Following Ben Ali's overthrow in January 2011, Tunisia held elections in October 2011 for a National Constituent Assembly, which was tasked with drafting a new constitution. Ennahda won a plurality and was the leading party in the three-party ruling coalition.

20. Habib Ellouz, a conservative Ennahda member of the National Constituent Assembly, expressed anger at the Tunisian government's decision labeling Ansar al Shari'a a terrorist organization which he argued "closed the doors of dialogue" with the movement, and would lead to more violence. Author interview with Habib Ellouz, Tunis, November 21, 2013.

21. The government replaced its polarizing interior minister Ali Laarayedh (though he later became prime minister) in an attempt to coordinate the security response, and after a second political assassination it declared Ansar al Shari'a a terrorist group.

22. Interestingly, Ennahda leader Rachid Ghannouchi rejects the notion of "traditional Tunisian Islam"; he has asserted that "Islam is one, the Qur'an and Sunna are one" and referred instead to "Tunisian Islamic culture." Author interview with Rachid Ghannouchi, Washington, D.C., February 26, 2014.

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

24. "Extremists Control Hundreds of Tunisia's Mosques: Religious Affairs Minister," AFP, March 31, 2012, <http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/03/31/204431.html>.

25. In most Arab countries mosque preachers are appointed by the government and receive government salaries. Unofficial

imams and preachers also exist primarily in unlicensed prayer and study meetings.

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

27. Author interview with advisor to minister of religious affairs, Tunis, November 20, 2013.

28. ICG, "Tunisia: Violence and the Salafi Challenge."

29. Author interview with Sufi imam, Tunis, November 22, 2013. The imam had been removed from his mosque position after criticizing the Ennahda government, and now had 24-hour police protection after receiving multiple death threats.

30. Tom Heneghan, "Ambiguous religion policy backfires on Tunisia's ruling Islamists," Reuters, September 3, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/09/03/us-tunisia-crisis-religion-idUSBRE9820C920130903>.

31. AFP, "Extremists Control Hundreds of Tunisia's Mosques."

32. The figure was supplied by a senior Tunisian Ministry of Interior official.

33. Author interview with advisor to minister of religious affairs, Tunis, November 20, 2013.

34. Under the Ben Ali regime, the government launched a radio station named Zaytouna Radio to broadcast state-approved religious programming.

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

36. The new minister of religious affairs appointed in January 2014, Mounir Tlili, was a professor at the University of Tunis until taking up his government post. Whether he will seek to maintain Zaytouna's status as solely a mosque is not clear.

37. Sheikh Obeidi reportedly issued a fatwa arguing that a group of artists exhibiting what he deemed sacrilegious art were infidels and could be killed according to Islamic law. In June 2012 the exhibit, entitled "The Art Spring," sparked two days of riots in Tunis that led to at least one death and over 160 arrests. See Tarek Amara and Lin Noueihed, "Tunisian Salafi Islamists Riot Over 'Insulting' Art," Reuters, June 12, 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/06/12/us-tunisia-salafis-clash-idUSBRE85B0XW20120612>.

38. Author interview with Said Ferjani, member of Ennahda political bureau, Tunis, November 18, 2013.

39. Author interview with Taieb Ghozi, Friday imam at Okba ibn Nafaa Mosque, Kairouan, November 20, 2013.

40. According to Adel al-Ilmi, the head of a conservative salafi group originally named the Group for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, all four madhhabs are correct but only the Maliki madhhab should be taught. Author interview, Tunis, November 19, 2013.

41. Author interview with Sheikh Farid El Beji, Tunis, November 22, 2013.

42. Some Sufis claim that Ennahda asked salafi imams to talk about the Maliki madhhab and wear traditional Tunisian clothes rather than the style favored by salafists in Egypt and the Gulf in order to appeal to local Tunisian customs.

43. The Sufi-leaning branch of Ennahda is estimated to represent about 15 to 20 percent of the movement. One of the founders of Ennahda, Abdel Fatah Morou, embraces Sufism.

44. In Tunisia rulers of the Hafsid dynasty (thirteenth to sixteenth centuries) also promoted the restoration of Maliki Islam, adopted the title *amir al-mu'minin*, and were legitimized by the oath of allegiance or *bay'a*. See Ira M. Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies* (Cambridge: University Press, 2002), 322.

45. The Justice and Development Party describes itself as guided by religious references, but not based on Islam.

46. Mosque workers include roles such as daily imam, Friday imam, *muezzin*, and *mударir* (Qur'an teacher).

47. In 2008 the Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs reportedly informed parliament that it had reached an agreement with the Ministry of Interior to monitor mosques. See U.S. State Department, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, "2008 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Morocco," February 25, 2009, <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/2008/nea/119122.htm>.

48. In 2011 small groups of imams held public protests against overt attempts by the Ministry of Religious Affairs to control the content of Friday sermons and restructure the religious sector. For more on extremism in state mosques see "Morocco's Deradicalization Strategy," CSIS Maghreb Roundtable, June 24, 2013, [http://csis.org/files/attachments/130624\\_Summary\\_Abaddi.pdf](http://csis.org/files/attachments/130624_Summary_Abaddi.pdf).

49. The dismissal follows a crackdown in September 2008 on imams and Qur'anic schools affiliated with the controversial imam Mohammed bin Abdulrahman al-Maghrawi. Maghrawi issued a controversial fatwa claiming that girls as young as nine years old could be legally married. See U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, "International Religious Freedom Report 2010," November 17, 2010, <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2010/148834.htm>.

50. There are currently approximately 400 schools for training imams in Morocco.

51. See for example Paul Schemm, "Moroccan Mosque Imams Protest Tight Government Controls on Preaching," AP, October 10, 2011, <http://www.moroccotomorrow.org/moroccans-mosque-imams-protest-tight-government-controls-on-preaching/>.

52. Author interview with official in Moroccan Ministry of Religious Affairs, Rabat, February 17, 2014.

53. Religious ties between Morocco and West Africa are also strengthened through the Tijaniya Sufi brotherhood, which is centered in Morocco and has tens of millions of followers across West Africa. For a more detailed analysis of Morocco's relations with sub-Saharan Africa, see Haim Malka, "Morocco's Rediscovery of Africa," CSIS, July 2013, [http://csis.org/files/publication/130731\\_Malka\\_MoroccoAfrica\\_Web\\_1.pdf](http://csis.org/files/publication/130731_Malka_MoroccoAfrica_Web_1.pdf).

54. Approximately 2 million Moroccans reside in France and close to 800,000 Moroccans legally reside in Spain. The numbers are higher if illegal residents are included.

55. For the text of the letter, see "Mohammed El Fazazi's Letter: 'Germany Is No Battle Zone,'" *Der Spiegel*, October 29,

2009, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/mohammed-el-fazazi-s-letter-germany-is-no-battle-zone-a-658103.html>.

56. For an analysis of Moroccan salafists see Mohamed Masbah, "Moving Towards Political Participation," German Institute for International and Security Affairs, January 2013, [http://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/comments/2013C01\\_msb.pdf](http://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/comments/2013C01_msb.pdf).

57. "Morocco King Attends Prayers led by Reformed Salafi-Jihadist," AFP, March 28, 2014, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2014/03/28/Morocco-king-attends-prayers-led-by-reformed-Salafi-jihadist.html>.

58. Over 1,000 Moroccans currently fight in Syria, primarily with the al Qaeda-affiliated Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) and Jabhat al-Nusra. Two Moroccans detained at Guantánamo, Brahim Benchekrout and Muhammad al Alami, went on to lead al Qaeda-affiliated Moroccan fighting units in Syria after their transfer to Morocco and subsequent release by Moroccan authorities. Both were reportedly killed in Syria. Author interview with Moroccan security official, Rabat, February 19, 2014.

59. According to Rachid Ghannouchi, the state can adopt Maliki Islam, but it cannot impose it or exclude other interpretations. Author interview with Rachid Ghannouchi, Washington, D.C., February 26, 2014.

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