



Islamists and Politics in Tunisia Today: Is the Foundation of a Democratic Islamic Party Possible?

Mouldi Lahmar

The central objective of the Islamic movement throughout the eras, and in the present moment as well, essentially focuses on the reconstruction of civil society, starting with the construction of the faithful religious individual and of the united community.... All of this [is] in accordance with the need to liberate religion, the individual, and the community of all power that considers itself above the umma, for example the State, or anything other than God.

—Rached Ghannouchi, Chairman of the Ennahdha Party, 1999

On January 14th, 2011 I strongly wished that the time of the events would stop completely for five years. Because we had a lot of things to do ...

—Abdelhamid Jlassi, Shura Council Member, the Ennahdha Party, 2017

Did the Tunisian Ennahdha party have a sociological and ideological predisposition inclining its transformation from a religious movement into a viable political party? How did an organization which was originally a

M. Lahmar (✉)

Doha Institute for Graduate Studies, Doha, Qatar

e-mail: mouldi.lahmar@dohainstitute.edu.qa

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group of preachers proclaiming Islamic societal salvation transform into a political party able to exercise power within a multiparty democratic system?

These questions may seem merely technical as the Ennahdha party already exists and its members support conforming with Tunisia's official charter regulating political parties. This association shifted over the past decades, organizing bureaucratically in a way that now clearly divides its operations between preaching for the salvation Islamic values and direct political action.

But this process was not inevitable, and the party has faced significant sociological and ideological challenges during its transformation process. Arguably, these challenges have negatively impacted the party's political efficacy. Furthermore, the future of the Ennahdha party's political-religious project will play out in accordance with how the party continues to manage this passage. Its commitment to participate as a party in a democratic system (or lack thereof) will surely influence the way in which large sections of Tunisian civil and political society react to it. At the heart of these challenges is the anthropological-political conception of Islam as a social fact in the Maussian sense of the term: as a method of exercising social control, which allows it to generate the world of salvation here and in the hereafter.

This work outlines the socio-political and cultural project of the Ennahdha party in its transformation into an Islamic Democratic Party (the party itself did not yet find the name that covenants him). Understanding of this process is facilitated through the analysis of official literature relating to the party combined with a limited treatment of the history of the birth and evolution of certain European Christian democratic parties, to which the Ennahdha party is relatable, especially regarding the confused relationship it has established between politics and religion. Finally, our work is based on a series of interviews with a group of party leaders on this subject.¹

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE BIRTH AND EVOLUTION OF THE ENNAHDHA PARTY: VISION AND TENSIONS

Over time, the vision of what would become the Ennahdha movement has generated socio-political tensions on three levels: in its relations with the Tunisian state before the revolution, in its relations with other opposition

¹The interviews concerned six leaders of the party. Three of them were Ministers.

groups and within its conception by certain segments of Tunisian civil society. These tensions are cultural, sociological and political, and are the central obstacles to the establishment of an Islamic democratic party.

But first, a word on terminology is necessary: caution and clarity when using Islamic vocabulary are essential² as much of the terminology used in this field is polysemic, meaning terms can cover a very wide range of ideas and political groupings. Islamic, for instance, can simply refer to Islam as religion and culture, while Islamist refers to the political use of Islam. However, there are Islamists who are almost secular, and then there are Islamists like *dā'sh* who practice a literal, dogmatic and formalist vision of Islam. Moreover, the polysemic aspect of the term Islamist is not unique, but to speak of Islamist in the singular without clarification can lead to dangerous amalgams and generalizations: for example, the Nahdha is a party that uses Islam as a political and moral reference, but it is radically different from *dā'sh* that itself uses Islam.

The Islamists who would later become the Ennahdha party founded a religious preaching group they named *jamāt addāwa* (which literally translates to “preaching group”) in 1972. This term *jamāt* is polysemic as sometimes it can refer to a group and other times to community, depending on its context. This specific translation of *jamāt* refers to the *umma islamyya* or Muslim community. The Arab-Muslim history of *umma* has become complicated with the birth of the nation-state in the modern Western sense of the term because the term nation-state can be translated as either *dowla wataniyya* (homeland-state) or as *umma* when used in reference to a specific country, for example, the Tunisian *umma*. Thus, already with the birth of the *jamāt islamyya* movement, there was tension between the nation-state and *umma* as the term *jamāt* could be national, Muslim or Islamist.³

What was the purpose of the *jamāt islamyya* in Tunisia? It saw itself as reviving faith and bringing back Muslims to their religion—its principles and values—which the group believed had been attacked and damaged by colonization, and then further marginalized by the new political elite of the independent state (Bourguiba and companions). According to Rached Ghannouchi, the *jamāt*, at its beginning, did not associate any political

²Burgat, F., La génération Al-Qaeda, les courants islamistes entre “dénominateur commun identitaire” et internationalisation de la résistance “islamique”, *Mouvement*, N 6, 2004, pp. 77–87; Etienne, B., *L'islamisme radical*, Paris, Hachette: 1987, pp. 207–208.

³Literally *Jamāt* refers to group. But group+ Islam could refer to *umma*.

vision with its project and its action. He stated that he had returned from France having in his head only the idea of first founding a general preaching movement born in the East [original Orient] and practical ways of making Muslim brothers.⁴

In 1981, the *jamāt addāwa* changed her name to become the *haraket al-ittijah al-islami* (Islamic Tendency Movement, known commonly in French as Mouvement de la Tendence Islamique or MTI). Tunisia's prime minister at the time, Mohamed Mzali, was a pan-Arabist who advocated for political openness by giving a few parties visas and permissions to carry out their activities legitimately. However, after the Tunisian bread riots in 1983 and 1984, the Islamic Tendency Movement was heavily persecuted. Its representatives had only a small period of respite and security before this time.

To become this political movement, the *jamāt addāwa* transformed ideologically through complex internal dynamics and thanks to two great events, one internal and one external. The interaction of three ideologies informed *jamāt addāwa*'s development. Its internal development was inspired by Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, the Ezzitouna Tunisian religious and legal school and finally the progressive left-leaning Muslims who advocate for a modernized interpretation of the religious text in order to adapt the practice to the present times. The dynamics of these three trends led to the progressive members of the *jamāt* leaving.⁵ But they did not leave without leaving behind effective criticism. After their departure, the *jamāt*'s remaining members began to forge closer ties with the enlightened Tunisian religious school, represented by Ezzitouna, and to espouse the idea of critically reading and analyzing religious texts.⁶

The events surrounding labor mobilization in 1977–1978 propelled the *jamāt* from preaching to political action. The conflict between the political establishment and the General Union of Tunisian Workers resulted in a general strike called by the trade union center in 1978. The regime cracked down on the strike, which ended with hundreds killed, injured or imprisoned. Rached Ghannouchi⁷ and other party members recalled how this event opened their eyes to their group's ineffectiveness

⁴ Ghannouchi, R., *From the Revolution to the Constitution, Arabic Politics*, N 18, 2016, pp. 105–116 (in Arabic).

⁵ This trend founded the magazine 15–21 (15 Hegir century–21 Christian century).

⁶ Zghal, A., and Mousa, A. *The Nahdha Movement between Brotherhood and the Tunisianity*, Tunis, Cérès, 2014, pp. 26–35 (In Arabic).

⁷ Ghannouchi, op., cit.

in this struggle, even though it counted many adherents. They realized on this occasion that the idea of rehabilitating Islam and its values needed to go beyond preaching, and that political action would be necessary for this project.

The 1979 Iranian Revolution further shook the *jamāt addāwa*. The Revolution excited the members of the *jamāt* for two main reasons. First, it showed that an Islamic revolution was possible (albeit shi'ite). Second, it proved that preaching can be politically effective, just as it can also remain as important as a means of religious socialization.

Jamāt's increasingly progressive ideological reorientation made space for Tunisia's 1978 General Strike and Iran's 1979 Revolution to inspire transformation in the spirit and the vision of the group. This was not because members felt their Islamic preaching was not political. On the contrary, they felt their work was important. The impetus for transformation into a political party was Habib Bourguiba's regime's aggressive moves against the growth of the *jamāt*.

In the context of the national and international events outlined above, the leadership of this *jamāt* association (which the most progressive Islamists have already left) decided to become explicitly politically active in conjunction with their politicized Islamic preaching, with a view to promoting the Islamic *umma*.⁸ Politics and preaching became the two philosophical building blocks for this developing Islamist movement.

When in 1980 the *jamāt* became the Islamic Tendency Movement, its constitutive declaration echoed its complex historical path where "oriental Islamism", the Tunisian Islamic legal school (Maghrebin in general), the criticism of progressive Islam and the pressures of political context intertwined.

First, its charter declared the principle of its foundation:

The causes of the continuous political, economic and cultural underdevelopment of our society firmly established among Islamists the feeling of their divine, national and human responsibility to their duty, to develop their efforts in order to liberate our country effectively, and to engage it in the right way, according to the just principles of Islam.⁹

⁸ Ghannoushi, *Ibid*.

⁹ First declaration of the constitution, Islamic Tendency Movement (Mouvement de la Tendence Islamique) June 6, 1981.

Then it states that:

The Islamic Tendency Movement does not present itself as the only spokesman of Islam in Tunisia ... However, while recognizing the right to everyone to have a sincere and responsible relationship with religion, the movement sees that it is its right to adopt a vision of Islam, so total that it is able to constitute the ideological base from which generate the different intellectual visions and the political, economic and social choices that define the identity of this movement, and determine both its strategic orientations and its contextual positions.¹⁰

In the Movement's fundamental principles, we find a totalizing interpretation of Islam as a divine dogma addressed to all humanity wherever it may be without physical limits—temporal or cultural. The Movement's Islamic principles must guide the major political and social choices of the believers who ultimately make up the *umma*. At the same time, we find the echoes of the internal and external intellectual dynamics of the movement, where the constraints of the political history of the country, especially that of the emergence of the nation-state, demand limitation of the application of Islamic dogma in citizen life.

Thus, the totalizing vision of Islam puts this movement in deep conflict with the socio-political “products” of the modern history of the country: first at the level of the idea of the nation-state and its foundational concepts, including those of the individual citizen, positive law and national sovereignty. A totalized vision of Islam also comes into conflict with the state's modernizing societal model which had been initiated by the national modernist elite after independence. The Islamic Tendency Movement's goal of having Islam be an effective moral guide regulating the details of everyday life requires state participation. But not only are individual freedoms at stake here, so too is the concept of a modern state with its positive right. Both are challenged by this totalizing vision of political Islam.

Criticism that was offered by the progressives of the Tunisian reformist school toward the Movement's Muslim Brotherhood-style ideology (represented by the old *jamā't*) triggered the process of what some Tunisians term the “Tunisification” of the movement. This “Tunisification” was the adoption by the MTI—not without hesitation and unease that exists until today—of what the political elite and the most influential fringe of Tunisian civil society (including the General Union of Tunisian Workers) call the

¹⁰ Ibid.

“gains of modernity”. Tunisification was the process where the MTI came to accept both the independence of the territorial sphere of the Tunisian nation-state as a unique place of political competition and the Code of Personal Status which “liberated” women and allowed for an open and relatively individualized way of life.

The period between 1980 and 1990 was very hard for the MTI. It did not obtain the authorization to carry out its activities freely, and the regime of Bourguiba, then of Ben Ali, continued to harass it even after the movement changed its name to try and rid itself of the ideological heaviness of the qualifier “Islamic” in favor of the term *nahdha* (Renaissance). On the other hand, it can be said that during this period the elite of the MTI, which became Ennahdha party in 1988, spent their time, in prison or elsewhere, trying to solve the theoretical dilemmas of this central question: what is building a modern Islamic society? Within this central problem exists numerous subsets of problems. How can we reconcile religious tautology with the freedom of private life? How is it possible to transform from a nation-state using religion for its own purposes into a state in the service of religion which can contribute to the salvation of the *umma* and its believers? Can an Islamic society adopt democratic principle based on citizenship and individual liberties? Will an Islamic society be a society of citizens or believers? What is the status of the nation-state from the point of view of the state of the *umma*? Is the *khilafa* (the caliphate) regime of “original” Islam, and to which the Islamic tradition in general refers, still valid for the *umma* of today’s believers?

THE REVOLUTION OF 2011: THE TIME TO ANSWER THE BIG QUESTIONS

Let’s start with a remark: neither the Islamists of the Nahdha, nor the Arab nationalists, nor the Marxist left triggered the revolution. On the contrary, all of these groups were surprised by it. The Islamists did not participate by calculation: morally, socially and technically the group was too affected by the police state of Ben Ali. They feared possible failure and the price they would pay if so. Organizational weakness prevented other groups from participation. It was modernist civil society organizations like lawyers, judges, independent journalists, female democrats and especially the General Union of Tunisian Workers who brought the revolutionary events of the semi-rural and small towns into large cities.¹¹

¹¹ See Mouldi Lahmar (Edited by), *The Tunisian Revolution: The Local Trigger Under the Microscope of Social Sciences*, Doha, ACRPS 2014, (In Arabic).

What did the protesters ask for? It was neither the Arab Union nor the restoration of Islamic values. And although 50% of the protesters who began the revolution lived in the countryside, they did not ask for land. They demanded work, eradication of corruption and political freedoms. All of these demands were translated through the slogan of “dignity equality and freedom”.

When the Islamists of the Ennahdha party fully entered the political scene after the departure of Ben Ali, they faced a three-part challenge. The first element of the challenge was the need to provide political responses to the demands of the protesters. The second was to adapt their “Islamic” socio-cultural policies and values to address concerns about individual liberties posed in the revolution. The third, and most difficult, was to establish a political separation between their party and other Islamic movements, which espoused more conservative rigorous interpretations of the faith while still maintaining their electoral base.

Their response confronted two constraints. The first was how to define a modern, democratic and developed Islamic society in a way which would appeal to the wider modernist fringe of Tunisian society. The other concerned maintaining a large fringe of their own electoral base that had been gained through preaching, who felt this modern society should be organized in accordance with the requirements of the Islamic religious model. This group felt the moral and socio-political life of the Muslim must be an extension of his faith to be modeled after the life of the Prophet in its finest details.

To deal with these constraints and disparate interests, the leaders of the Nahdha drew from two registers of experience. The first was the intellectual transformations party leaders say they experienced between 1982 and 2010 while in prison and/or while living abroad in modern democratic countries. The second was the party’s 2005 so-called secular Tunisian opposition. This committed the Ennahdha party (and all signatories) to admit and adopt several core values acquired by Tunisian society after independence, including, above all, peaceful political coexistence (the principle of plurality) and the rights of women.

It was after experiencing power in the years 2012 and 2013 that the Ennahdha party began really confronting the practical challenges on which its political future depended. And it is also within this context that the model of Christian Democracy, as a horizon for this party, began to germinate.

THE FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES OF CHRISTIAN DEMOCRACY AND THE CHALLENGES OF AN ISLAMIC CONCEPTION OF DEMOCRACY

Within the Ennahdha party there is not a clear consensus around the model of Christian Democracy as a plausible horizon for the party. The idea of the political “trivialization” of the Party’s historical project while referring in its vision of the world to a divine revelation is not shared by all. Furthermore, what attracts the leaders of this party to the model of Christian Democracy is something other than the principles that underlie it.

First of all, let us explore the principles that today generally underpin the Christian democratic parties of Europe, most of which find their ideological and historical roots in the period of the French Revolution. Three main concepts are central to most current European Christian democratic parties (all of which have had long periods of adaptation with the principles of modernity)¹²:

- Christian democracy supports the separation of church and state. At the same time, it suggests the state share certain values with the church, for instance, the conception of the Man (humanity’s sin nature and its freedom of choice), the recognition of individual dignity, respect for freedom and responsibility, the need to protect unborn life, the preservation of Creation and respect for family.
- In conceiving policy on the basis of the Christian conception of Man, Christian democracy emphasizes that it is not possible to deduce a practical political program from the Christian faith. And that is precisely why it is not the arm of the church in the political space.
- In the political arena, freedom is expressed by the inalienable fundamental rights guaranteed in the constitution (positive rights of freedom), such as freedom of belief and conscience, freedom of opinion, press, assembly and association or the right to vote, both active and passive.¹³

¹² Karsten Grabow, *Démocratie chrétienne: principes et conception politique*, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, Imprimé à Tunis, SD.

¹³ See:

- Montuclard Maurice. *Aux origines de la démocratie chrétienne. Influence du contexte socio-culturel sur les “croyances” religieuses de divers groupes catholiques entre 1893 et 1898*, In, *Archives de sociologie des religions*, n°6, 1958. pp. 47–89.
- Karsten Grabow, op., cit., pp. 9–18.

Christian Democracy, a historical product of the secularization of society, according to the internal experience of each country, insists on central Christian values, such as human dignity, individual freedom, the protection of life and the support of the family. But at the same time, Christian democracy recognizes, assumes and adopts the historical reversal of hierarchies of reference in the conception of political power. It functions in a way that respects positive law and the sovereignty of the people. Thus, any change in the amount of practicing believers in the population of a country that espouses the Christian democratic model does not affect this conception of politics as society accepts each individual's relationship with God is understood to be a private business. America and France both are home to Christian democratic parties, and both have a clear constitutional separation between church and state. The rate of Christian religiosity is very different in both countries, but the effective separation of church and state means shifting public religiosity does not undermine the state's ability to function democratically.¹⁴ And it is perhaps also for this reason that Habermas considered a religious debate in a secular context as an integral part of a dynamic civil society.

The question now facing the Ennahdha party in Tunisia is whether it can evolve politically toward the model of Christian democracy while maintaining its founding principles. The party must declare the position of religion in civil society because it is from this that the conceptions of this Party are generated: the state, democracy, society and individual freedoms. All problems of the theoretical, ideological and political *nahdha* lie there.

Does the Party have answers to these questions? When releasing the official document of its tenth Congress held in 2016, we find the following answers:

- Durand Jean-Dominique. Aux origines du succès de la démocratie chrétienne en Italie au lendemain de la Deuxième Guerre mondiale, in, *Matériaux pour l'histoire de notre temps*, n°39–40, pp. 16–19.
- Hogwoodm, P., Roberts, J., K., *European Politics Today*, Manchester University Press, 1997.
- Mayeur, J.-M., *Des partis catholiques à la démocratie chrétienne*, XIXe-XXe siècles, Paris, Armand Colin, 1980.
- Van Hecke, S. et Gerard, E. (dir.), *Christian Democratic Parties in Europe since the End of the Cold War*, Leuven, Leuven University Press, 2004.

¹⁴Barbe, A., *La laïcité en France et aux USA*, *Questions Internationale*, N76, 2015, pp. 87–94; Tocqueville, De, A., *De la démocratie en Amérique*, Paris, Ed. L'Harmattan, 2010.

- Islam “is the supreme reference on which the Ennahdha movement is built. This vision includes faith in the afterlife as well as in this world here below”.¹⁵
- “The Ennahdha movement is, as a democratic political party based on Islam, it is extremely necessary to translate this basis into a system of values, and to represent it in all its social and cultural political expressions so that it does not remain a simple slogan unrelated to reality”.¹⁶
- “Freedom is a divine gift; it is a value and an original human right without distinction on the basis of color, sex and religion”.¹⁷
- “Democracy is the contemporary translation of *shura* (concertation), which is a religious obligation, in order to achieve the objectives of the latter in the areas of plurality, dialogue, management of different as well as that of the rotation of power through elections”.¹⁸
- “The relationship between society and the state is built on cooperation and complementarity, but the priority is for the society. It is the latter who takes the initiative to choose the content of the national project and to entrust the State with its execution”.¹⁹

THE EMBARRASSMENT OF PRACTICAL QUESTIONS

According to the leaders of the Ennahdha party, these principles do not contradict the principles of political modernity, including individual liberties. According to Rached Ghannouchi, democracy, citizenship and liberty have their origins in the great history of Islam, especially in the Qur’an and in the sayings and behavior of the Prophet.²⁰ Also, the Congress of the Ennahdha party insists throughout its constitution, almost in each of its paragraphs, that in the society to which the party aspires includes political pluralism, collective and individual liberties and the rights of women. All of these are already guaranteed by the constitution, and the party aims to create a political culture that will uphold them.

¹⁵ Official document of the 10th Congress of the Ennahdha Movement, May 2016, p. 43.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 44.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 45.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 51.

²⁰ Ghannouchi, R., *Democracy, towards an indigenization of contemporary concepts*, Tunis, Dar Al-Sahwa, 2015, pp. 11–22.

However, it is in practice that this vision was put to test, both inside and outside the party. The Ennahdha party's president Ghannouchi related in his evaluation of the political experience of his party after leaving the Government, which he published in 2016, that when they were writing the constitution, many of his colleagues in the party did not admit that *sharī'ah* (religious law) is not indicated as a legal source.²¹ This was confirmed by nearly everyone we interviewed during our investigation. Large sections of Ennahdha's electoral base were won through preaching society's salvation in this world and the hereafter must be guided by the Muslim faith and the *sharī'ah*. For party supporters, achieving these goals was believed to come through faith and *sharī'ah* informed by *ijtihad* (Islamic legal effort of innovation, or independent reasoning).

The Ennahdha party also came into confrontation with modernists in Tunisian civil society, including organizations defending women's rights and individual freedoms in general.²² Conflict arose because of the Ennahdha's commitment to Islam was shared by other extremist parties who took actions after the revolution (not systematically) against individual and intellectual liberties. For instance, various extremists attacked an art exhibition and a cinema, closed cafes during Ramadan, and sent death to writers critical of religion. The popular base of the Ennahdha party and even some of its leaders publicly endorsed or justified these acts in the name of the values of Islam, which, according to them, should be followed, if not respected, by everyone.

These acts led the opponents of the Ennahdha party to question the political and social foundations of this party, and especially its conception of the relationship between politics and religion. The party has been accused of engaging in doublespeak about the societal model it would like to impose on society in the name of religion. It claims to endorse a political system and society similar to the Christian democratic model, wherein Islamic values underpin its positions on political and social concerns, but where individual freedoms are respected. But the actions of party members, in supporting activities suppressing individual liberties in the name of Islam, have called this commitment into question.

²¹ Ghannouchi, R., *From the Revolution...*, op. cit.

²² For example, in 2013, many of demonstrations took place in Tunis to oppose some articles in the draft constitution using the term complementarity between man and women instead of equality.

BACK TO ANTHROPOLOGY: ON THE HORIZON A RELIGIOUS REVOLUTION OR A GRAMSCIAN HEGEMONY?

The Ennahdha party's response to these challenges took shape at its tenth Congress, when the majority of the party leadership, led by its chairman Ghannouchi, made the decision (against the advice of some of its members) to establish an organizational separation between the party's political and predicative activities.

Through this separation the party hopes to be able to solve the problem inherent in its historical foundation, namely its conception of Islam as both a way of life and government. According to this decision, the task of the Ennahdha will be to mobilize citizens to conceive, defend and, if necessary, execute a purely political program. Its members will no longer have the right to benefit, as before, from a dual religious and political status. Therefore, members will no longer be able to use mosques to publicize their ideas or the Ennahdha party. On the other hand, the activists of his movement can, but only as members of the civil society, specialize in the field of preaching to believers, and continue the work once done by the members of their party without distinction from their political activity. This will allow the latter to tap its potential voters in the religious field without betraying the principle of the separation of the two fields. It should be noted here that it is in Habermas that the Islamists have found this solution: religion, they say, is not a component of civil society.²³

By opting for this solution, where activities contributing to a highly charged ideological endgame are carefully separated between an individual's citizen and believer status, the Ennahdha party preserves its holistic view of society and religion. It reproduces the ever-strong tension between its conception of society/politics/religion and the general principles of modernity, which are considered as invented and imposed universally by the colonial and globalizing West. However, the Western experience of modernity and secular governance is not monolithic, as evidenced in the different experiences of secular France and England.

Indeed, the Ennahdha party unreservedly endorses the ideas of democracy and freedom as the founding principles of modernity and recognizes the historical role of the West in their development. But as a political

²³During my talks with the party leaders, they all told me that they read the famous Habermas' book, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*.

movement with a religious and cultural project at its heart, namely to free the Muslim world from Western domination, it argues that these modern Western secular principles are also found within Islam. Therefore, it is enough to rehabilitate them so that Tunisia, as a Muslim society, can take its place in the modern world.

How can this project be realized? Ghannouchi hopes to build this civil society informed by Islamic principles. In his 1999 book, *Approaches in Secularism and Civil Society*, he states:

The central objective of the Islamic movement in all times, and at this very moment, focuses mainly on the reconstruction of civil society,²⁴ from the building of the truly believing individual, and from the united (group) community that works to realize the will of God on earth. A community predisposed to take on the will of the almighty to spread, through the initiatives of its members, everywhere justice, and to build institutions, specific to the civil society, allowing the Muslim society to assume its mission of to discover the universe to inhabit it and to spread goodness there. All this in accordance with the need to liberate religion, the individual and the community of all power considering themselves above the *umma*, for example the State, or other than that of God.²⁵

His vision refers to a model of society where what is important is the *umma* of believers. If the individual is free, he is free first of all from any power claiming to be above that of God, even if it is the State. The individual is free to be a part of or to reject the first principle that founds the Islamic *umma*, that is, the belief in God and his Prophet Muhammad. The individual who accepts Islam is free to either practice his faith or not. He is also free not to share in the *umma*. The political and the religious have a different status. A community religiosity not very tolerant of individual liberties can thus exist while liberties are still protected.

The social changes that Tunisia has experienced since the end of the nineteenth century, accelerated by colonization and then by the independent national state, tore apart traditional affiliations and propelled individuals into a new world relatively independent of old ties. This has

²⁴The translation into Arabic of the concept of civil society is relatively difficult. The term used here by Ghannouchi in Arabic is *Abli*. *Abli* refers to closeness in every sense: kinship, neighborhood and religious affiliation. In contrast the term *madani* actually refers to civil.

²⁵Ghannouchi, Rached, *Approaches in Secularism and Civil Society*. London: The Maghreb Center for Research and Translation, 1999, p. 61 (in Arabic).

resulted in a strong demand for individual freedoms. Hence, a challenge stands before the Islamists of the Ennahdha. They must navigate the transformation of their vision of the world and of religion so that it becomes capable of assuming the socio-cultural and political tensions contained in the following equations: community-society/believer-citizen/*umma*-nation-state/God-people.

Currently, the Islamists of the Ennahdha are accused by their opponents, modernists (or laymen, as Islamists call them), of doublespeak. On the one hand, to Islamists, Ghannouchi claims to advocate an Islamic society, on the other, to the rest of Tunisian society and those abroad, Ghannouchi claims a universal vision for his societal project. But the Ennahdha party defends itself by assuring critics it is pioneering a genuine Islamic way that through the practice of *ijtihad* remains open to certain elements of what appears to be Western modernity. It asserts democracy and individual freedom are Islamic values too.

According to the leaders of the Ennahdha party we interviewed, on the horizon there perhaps lies Islamic democracy similar to extant Christian democracy. But has the Ennahdha party theoretically and ideologically resolved the societal dilemmas of the Tunisian revolution? During our investigation, one of the most influential leaders of the party Abdelhamid Jassi stated: “On January 14th, 2011 I strongly wished that the time of the events would stop completely for five years. Because we had a lot of things to do ...”. On the horizon a religious revolution or a Gramscian religious hegemony?