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TUNISIA'S CULTURE WAR: SALAFISTS RUN AMOK

Rob Prince

Foreign Policy in Focus, July 25, 2012

October of last year, Tunisia held national elections for a 'constituent assembly' - a legislative body mandated to re-write the Tunisian constitution for the post-Ben Ali era. The Ennahda (Renaissance) Party, an Islamic Party cruelly and unfairly repressed for decades under the Ben Ali regime, gained 41% of the vote, the largest percentage of any political party participating.

While it claims to be in a coalition with two more secular parties - a fact which is technically accurate but politically empty - despite appearances to the contrary, Ennahda wields the power behind the scenes in the country, in a manner which is virtually undisputed. If the recent Ennahda congress, which drew 30,000 attendees, is an accurate measure, all indications are that, despite opposition, it will tighten its grip in the period ahead.

The other two political parties involved in the ruling coalition exist more on paper than in fact; unlike Ennahda that has a nationwide organization and its eyes and ears everywhere, the other two are essentially Tunis- (and a few other

metropolitan areas) based. There is organized opposition to some of Ennahda's policies, especially its economic policies by the trade union federation, but apart from that and a few disparate elements, the opposition is weak, disorganized and with little influence. Ennahda runs the show....

Despite rhetoric to the contrary and fine words about the Tunisia's Arab Spring, since October, the political atmosphere in the country has shifted markedly to the right as a new and hitherto marginal element in Tunisian society has raised what I can only describe as its ugly head: radical Islamic fundamentalism, or as it is also known, Salafism.

Salafism's base in Tunisian society in the past has been narrow to naught. That it should emerge with such force and unchecked violence is the result of a number of factors: the sufferings of Islamists in Ben Ali's prisons whose anger has been easily manipulated; some Tunisians trained by fundamentalist militants in Afghanistan and Iraq; some spill over from Libya; U.S. acquiescence.

More importantly though, Tunisian Salafism has been fueled by Saudi and Qatari funding and Ennahda tolerance for and defense of their actions. A great deal of money has been pouring into Tunisia, both formally (loans to the government) and informally through the mosques....The strings attached to Saudi and Qatari aid include opening up Tunisia's political space to Salafist elements to grow if not thrive uninhibited by any legal niceties.

And as both Saudi Arabia and Qatar are close and strategic allies to the United States, one can surmise that at the very least, the Obama Administration is aware of the Saudi-Qatari role and has either turned a blind eye to it, or more likely, has encouraged these developments....It appears as long as the current Tunisian government adheres to U.S. neo-liberal economic guidelines - which it does - and generally supports regional security interests, which it has proven faithful to concerning current U.S. policy towards Libya and Syria, it is more than likely that the Obama Administration and any that might follow - minus a few weak protests - will turn a blind eye from the current Tunisian Islamist religious offensive....

Ennahda, which fashions itself internationally as 'a moderate Islamic party' bares much responsibility for this current Salafist surge. They have failed to rein them in, something which would have been easy to do earlier on. Nor do they seem to want to. Their defense of Salafism is hollow and disingenuous, empty as an

Egyptian Salafist imam's advice on satellite television. Ennahda speaks of defending Salafist free speech rights and thus says nothing about the repeated anti-Jewish slander (that has included calls of killing, removing Jews from the country). It claims TO be caught in the middle between Salafist excesses and 'secular fundamentalism'.

...[B]y focusing on cultural questions - what makes or doesn't make a good Muslim - rather than what makes or doesn't make a good citizen, Ennahda has shifted the national discussion away from Tunisia's economic crisis which has only worsened since Ben Ali departed the country so unceremoniously. Low wages, high unemployment levels, especially among the country's educated youth, combined with a regime with a reputation for rampant corruption, were among the key factors triggering the Tunisian Revolt....

Although Salafists now claim that the Arab Spring was a call to institute Shari'a, nowhere in the Arab World, certainly not in Tunisia, were these elements out on the streets, risking life and limb to overthrow the Ben Alis and Mubaraks of the Arab World. But in the aftermath of the historic events, with a little help from their Saudi and Qatari friends, Salafists have become quite active. There seems to be a division of labor between Ennahda and the Tunisian Salafists. Ennahda controls the levers of political power.

The Salafists have targeted the mosques, the media and the educational system for their special attention. If Ennahdha formally renounces basing the new Tunisian constitution on Shari'a law, the Salafists informally and actively work with such a goal in mind, and they are not shy about admitting it. Far from it.

In Tunisia, Salafist rallies regularly include attacks against secularists, Islamic moderates and Jews; calls for shari'a law; and, where possible, hoisting of the black banner of Salafist Islam to replace the Tunisian national flag. They have also desecrated Christian churches in Tunis. Their actions have long ago surpassed simply violent and bigoted speech.

It has included trashing media outlets, threatening journalists and cultural people, trying to 'take over' universities, attacking trade union offices, threatening women who refuse to be pressured to dress as the Salafists demand, burning down bars and liquor stores. It is not only an attack on diversity, on the place for the more secular elements within Tunisian society, it is also an offensive against the more

moderate forms of Islam that have existed in the country for centuries.

None of this has been prosecuted by the Ennahda-dominated Tunisian government. The list goes on. Tunisia's Salafists have become nothing short of the brown shirts of the Tunisian Arab Spring, and their actions and strategies parallel similar Salafist campaigns in Egypt, Yemen, Libya and Syria. Their role is clear: reshape the country's tolerant cultural map with an increasingly narrow vision of an Islamic society; to freeze the Arab Spring social revolution dead in its tracks, to reverse the progress demanded by millions throughout the Arab world for social and economic justice....([Top](#))

IS THE MUCH CELEBRATED ARAB SPRING COMING TO AN END?

Richard Minter
Forbes, July 19, 2012

The rising Islamist tide may recede sooner than expected in the Arab world — if recent events in Morocco are any guide.

Six months after a surprising win in that North African country's first elections under its new constitution, the Islamist Party of Justice and Development (known as PJD) is in trouble with voters. Urban and rising middle-class Moroccans—the core of the PJD's support—are questioning whether the ruling party can create jobs. These voters supported the more secular Socialist and Liberal parties in the 2007 elections, switched to the Islamists in 2011, and now seem to be returning home. Meanwhile, the PJD's cultural policies have emboldened rival parties, business leaders and activists. Now they are fighting back and the Islamists are falling in public opinion polls.

Most Middle East analysts make two fundamental errors: They have a static perspective that simply extends the present into the future in a straight line, and they tend to focus on Egypt, where one-quarter of the Arab League lives, while ignoring the North African and Gulf states where important changes are underway.

The Muslim Brotherhood has been a strong force [in Egypt] since the end of colonial rule in the 1940s....This institutional force allows it to mobilize voters and

win elections. The Brotherhood's powerful and well-oiled political machine in Egypt lacks counterparts in many other Arab nations.

Elections can sweep Islamists to power, but they can also sweep them out when they fail to perform. This is precisely what happened in Iraq, when Moctar al-Sadr's radical party failed to deliver on its promises when it controlled the Health and Education ministries. The party continued in the ruling coalition but its ministers were removed from governing in these vital areas, lest the coalition suffer a defeat in the next election cycle.

Now we are seeing both phenomena in Morocco. Arab Spring came there in February 2011, with massive but largely peaceful demonstrations. In a July 2011 referendum, a new Moroccan constitution established a constitutional monarchy, akin to that of Sweden or Great Britain. That constitution provided for an elected prime minister to lead the government and all ministries, while the king maintained his status as the country's highest religious authority and commander of the armed forces.

Following the November 2011 elections, a new PJD-led government took power in January, ruling in a coalition based on a 27% parliamentary plurality. Both the king and the new Islamist government were tested by a skeptical public that watched to see whether the king would actually share power (he did) and whether the Islamists would govern as centrists as they promised (they haven't yet).

Today the king of Morocco is more popular than ever. And the Islamists much less so. Even fringe Islamist elements, left out of the government, who have challenged the monarchy for decades have now altered their rhetoric. They have stopped campaigning against the king's role as the nation's religious authority and taken instead to criticizing the ruling Islamist PJD for its handling of domestic social issues.

While the system has gained credibility for empowering voters and been a quiet triumph for Arab democracy...the ruling PJD appears to have lost some credibility due to their poor performance on the economy.

Part of the reason may be the understandably high expectations of voters: unlike in Tunisia and Egypt, where Islamist movements were banned from the political process, in Morocco the monarchy has actively encouraged their participation over the past two decades. Moroccans felt that the PJD's experience in political

opposition would allow it to hit the ground running when governing as a majority bloc.

This optimistic view has faded. Even defenders of the Islamist government now admit that the PJD still hasn't made the transition from a platitude-driven opposition party to a ruling party capable of making economic reforms.

Amid a global economic crisis and grave security concerns arising from Libya and other nations ringing the Sahara, elements of the PJD have focused on minor social issues that animate only their hard-core supporters, such as whether to allow the sale or consumption of alcohol, or which Moroccans should be described as "Zionists." At times, moreover, PJD activism on these fronts appears to have taken precedence over the fostering of democratic freedoms, economic development, and anti-corruption measures—the items that won them the election just seven months ago.

Democratic freedoms were not advanced when some PJD members of parliament called for the censoring of 2M, the popular Moroccan television network, for broadcasting a documentary about Moroccan Jews emigrating to Israel. (The bigger and more worrying question—why does one of the Arab World's oldest Jewish populations feel it must flee?) Islamist officials claimed that the network was "Zionist" for airing the program. Liberals responded that airing a historical documentary about Moroccan Jews was a legitimate choice and in keeping with Morocco's tradition of tolerance toward Jews.

Indeed, King Muhammad V, the present king's grandfather, memorably protected the Jewish population from the pro-Nazi Vichy government during World War II, and both his son and grandson have worked hard to support peace initiatives between Israelis and Palestinians. The PJD attack on the network backfired. The press and the public rallied to the network's side. Suddenly the PJD was on the defensive....

Meanwhile, the PJD-led government has not yet advanced a coherent strategy to fight corruption in Morocco. Much of the talk about corruption has been accusations of corrupt behavior leveled against particular political figures, who are coincidentally political rivals of the PJD. In a few cases, these accusations were retracted by the PJD after they proved unable to substantiate them....

Before the Islamist government, some agencies were created to fight bribery and promote fair competitive practices — but they were not granted the legal mandate needed. That was supposed to be left to a new elected government. Many Moroccans hoped that the PJD would give these institutions the “teeth” they require, but so far nothing has happened. The Islamists seem uninterested in what was the biggest applause line of Arab Spring demonstrations this past year. Now their inaction is costing them precious political support....

Among political parties, as well, factionalism is out of vogue and coalition building is in. For decades, Morocco’s liberal, socialist, and secular parties have been splintered — divided by personal differences in a low-stakes parliamentary game that only alienated voters. Today, a confluence of political streams are flowing together to form a pact to challenge the PJD with a no-confidence vote in parliament....

...[T]he patience of the public is wearing thin. Every day, the Islamists have new opportunities to advance strategically shrewd policies to redress the country’s social and economic problems. So far, the party has passed up these opportunities and squandered time on 7th century priorities.

But the people have not passed up these opportunities. Fighting the Islamists seems to have galvanized large sections of Moroccan society and invigorated that nation’s nascent democracy. The Islamists—in Morocco and across the Arab world—may be finding out that the Arab appetite for reform and economic growth is large, but the demand for theocratic restrictions much less so. Arabs want their own Switzerland, not their own Iran....([Top](#))

ECHOES OF IRAQ: YEMEN’S WAR AGAINST AL-QAEDA TAKES A FAMILIAR TURN

Casey Coombs
Time World, August 10, 2012

Even amid the escalating suicide-bomb campaign across Yemen, the attack on a wake in Jaar in southern Yemen’s Abyan province was particularly grisly and premeditated, designed to inflict maximum damage. It took place on Aug. 4, at around 11 p.m., as some 150 neighbors and relatives gathered outside the home

of local tribal sheik Abdulatif Sayed following the funeral of his close relative.

While they were grieving, a young al-Qaeda recruit from Jaar infiltrated the crowd, resting on a cooler he had brought with him. Then, according to several survivors, he detonated his suicide vest, and that blast ignited the cooler, which was packed with more explosives and metal ball bearings. Shrapnel killed some 50 guests, including the sheik’s two brothers.

However, the intended target, Sayed, survived. Al-Qaeda had particularly wanted to assassinate him. Sayed had defected from the terrorist organization three months earlier to head a growing force of anti-al-Qaeda tribal militias, also known as Popular Committees, sweeping the region.

If the tribal uprising against al-Qaeda sounds familiar, then you are hearing echoes of [Iraq](#). Aysh Awas, director of Security and Strategic Studies at Sheba, a think tank in Sana’a, says Ansar al-Shari’a — the political front of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) — is doing in Yemen what al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) did following the U.S. invasion in 2003: wage suicide-bomb-led jihad to derail the country’s nascent Washington-supported democracy and replace it with an Islamic state based on Shari’a.

And just as anti-al-Qaeda, U.S.-backed tribal sheiks in Iraq banded together to secure their territory from AQI, Popular Committees are popping up across Yemen to combat the local franchise of the movement founded by the late Osama bin Laden. “In light of the recent attacks, it seems that anything is likely to happen, and the situation in Yemen may be turning into the Iraqi model,” Awas says.

Unlike Iraq, however, the tribal Popular Committees don’t seem to be getting the big boost that Iraq’s Sunni Awakening groups did. In the past couple of weeks, the suicide-bombing campaign has led local Popular Committees to abandon their patrols and refuse to return unless Yemen’s new government provides them with greater autonomy, salaries and other benefits enjoyed by government troops. But President Rabu Mansour Hadi, who succeeded Ali Abdullah Saleh earlier this year, is mired in a military-reform battle with the country’s top brass and unwilling or unable to act on those demands.

Amid the tumult of last year’s Arab Spring-related popular uprisings in Yemen, AQAP and Ansar al-Shari’a seized Jaar and neighboring towns like Lawder along the Gulf of Aden. It took the government months — with the help of the Popular

Committee militias – to take back Jaar and the AQAP-occupied towns.

But morale has broken down. Popular Committee fighters from Lawder have stopped cooperating with government soldiers in their pursuit of Ansar al-Shari'a, claiming that it is their land and they are responsible for protecting it. "My men won't continue to fight alongside the military. We have shown that we can handle Ansar al-Shari'a ourselves, and we are prepared do it, but not for nothing," says Popular Committee leader Ahmed Ashawi from Lawder. Ashawi argues that the tribesmen need to be accommodated soon, before their allegiance shifts to other power brokers in the region. The tension has fueled mutual distrust between the two groups, leading some government troops to return to Sana'a.

Soldiers in the region took another blow on Aug. 6, when President Hadi placed Lawder's Republican Guard brigade, along with more than a dozen others, under a new commander. The move was seen as part of Hadi's attempt to tip the country's balance of power toward himself and away from its top two military commanders: the former President's son, Brigadier General Ahmed Ali Abdullah Saleh, head of the elite Republican Guards; and his chief rival General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, who broke away from Saleh's forces during last year's uprisings, taking the First Armored Division with him. Hadi designated himself the head of the Presidential Protective Forces, which is made up of three Republican Guard brigades and one from the First Armored Division.

Ahmed al-Zurqa, an independent political analyst and AQAP expert, describes Hadi's decree as a farsighted measure. "It's an initial step toward rebuilding the military away from personal loyalties to make it capable of conducting the war against al-Qaeda without parties playing the al-Qaeda card as a weapon in their own conflicts," he says. Both generals Saleh and Mohsen have been suspected of playing the al-Qaeda card to settle personal disputes and further political objectives.

Like other observers, al-Zurqa would rather the war against al-Qaeda not depend on tribal militias. "The role of the Popular Committees must be terminated or they must be incorporated within the security forces because at the moment, they are militias with independent loyalties. They may soon become a source of problems." The long-term solution to Islamic extremism, according to Awas, would involve conducting a "smarter war based on intelligence and enforcing the state through public services, job opportunities, resettling conflict refugees and rebuilding what the war destroyed." ...([Top](#))