



Alwaleed Bin Talal Center for
Muslim-Christian Understanding
GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

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Cover image: © Nouredine Jebnoun, sign in Tunis reads “No allegiance but to Tunisia”.

Noureddine Jebnoun

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Foreword

The Arab uprisings (Tunisia's Dignity and Egypt's Tahrir Sq. Revolutions) in 2011 ushered in a new era in the history of the Middle East. Spreading to several major countries (Libya, Syria, and Bahrain) in a short period of time, they exposed the fragility of the Mubarak, Ben Ali and Qaddafi authoritarian regimes and shattered the existing myths about Arab and Muslim societies. Tunisia and Egypt were the first to hold free and open democratic elections and to see mainstream Islamist parties, Ennahda in Tunisia and Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party in Egypt come to power. In contrast to Egypt where a military-led coup toppled President Mohammed Morsi, Tunisia, despite many difficulties and conflicts, has continued on the path to democracy, ratifying its new constitution on 27 January 2014.

Responding to the overthrow of Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, Rachid al-Ghannouchi, leader of the Tunisian Islamic opposition party, Ennahda (or Hizb al-Nahda, the Renaissance Party) declared, "The dictator has fallen but not the dictatorship."¹ Al-Ghannouchi and other leaders, who had fled to England and France more than two decades before and thus were absent during the uprising (Dignity revolution) in Tunisia quickly returned to participate in the reconstruction of a new Tunisia rooted in "democracy and justice within the Tunisian identity."² And to the surprise of many, Ennahda seemed to achieve the impossible. After decades of exile abroad and its total suppression in Tunisia, the party swept elections.

Rachid al-Ghannouchi is pivotal to understanding Ennahda's growth and development as an Islamic movement and to its return and success in elections and role in rebuilding a new Tunisia. Al-Ghannouchi's importance though extends beyond Tunisia for his widely regarded as a major activist-intellectual, a creative reformer who has contributed to issues of Islamic renewal and reform from the relationship of Islam to secularism, democracy, civil society and women's rights.

Rachid al-Ghannouchi Khriji

Rachid al-Ghannouchi Khriji was born on 22 June 1941 in southeastern Tunisia. Al-Ghannouchi attended Zaytouna (secondary school). Zaytouna was uncompromisingly traditional, focused, as he has said, on "problems that no longer were ours that had been imposed on us by colonialism and that had become the status quo."³ After graduation he studied briefly at Zaytouna University's faculty of theology. However, torn between its traditionalism and the new Western oriented society in which he lived, he left Zaytouna, studying first briefly in Cairo and then in Damascus, where he received a bachelor's degree.

Al-Ghannouchi's time at Damascus University (1964-1968) marked a major

¹ Esam Al-Amin, "The Fall of the West's Little Dictator," *CounterPunch*, 19 January 2011. Available at: <http://www.counter-punch.org/2011/01/19/the-fall-of-the-west-s-little-dictator/>

² Graham Usher, "The Reawakening of Nahda in Tunisia," *Middle East Report*, 30 April 2011. Available at: <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero043011>

³ Azzam S. Tamimi, *Rachid Ghannouchi: A Democrat within Islamism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, 11.

turning point in his life. The impact of the crushing Arab defeat (the combined forces of Egypt, Syria and Jordan by the Israeli military) in the Six Day War of 1967 discredited Arab nationalism. Like many Arab youth, al-Ghannouchi turned to Islam, but to a more progressive Islamic vision “an Islam that was alive”⁴ in contrast to Zaytouna and other conservative Islamic universities which he characterized as “museums.”⁵

Eventually, my mind rested assured of the wrongfulness of the nationalist way. While my heart was perfectly reassured of Islam, I realized that what I had been following was not the right Islam but a traditional and primitive version of it. The traditional model was not ideological, nor did it represent a comprehensive system. It was a conventional religious sentiment, a set of traditions, customs, and rituals that fell short of representing a civilization or a way of life. I discovered that I was not a true Muslim and therefore I had to take a decision to re-enter Islam.⁶

The Birth of A Movement

In 1970, al-Ghannouchi returned home to Tunisia and a teaching position on the philosophy faculty at a secondary school and also began preaching in local mosques. With Sheikh Abdel- Fattah Morou, a lawyer, he created a small grassroots Islamic movement that would soon become a major force in the resurgence of Islam in secular Tunisia. Initially focused on social and cultural issues instead of explicit political messages, it offered an Islamic alternative to Western culture: “[Our work] focused on the development of ideological conscience and consisted essentially of a critique of the Western concepts which dominate the spirit of youth.”⁷ A popular teacher and leader, he attracted many young poor working class university students as well as other sectors of society. They then joined forces with the Quranic Preservation Society, an apolitical cultural and social organization that emphasized piety, morality, and faithfulness to Islam, appealing to those who believed that Tunisian society had lost its identity due to its overreliance on the West.

In 1979, al-Ghannouchi created the Islamic Association (Jama‘at al-Islamiyya) a political group (though not a political *party*). The Association reached out to lower and middle class families, called for an end to Habib Bourguiba’s one party system, and espoused a vision of Islam that addressed contemporary problems like workers’ rights, poverty, wages, and political participation. In 1981, the Islamic Association was transformed into a political party, the Islamic Tendency Movement (MTI).

The MTI was not the only Islamic political group to emerge from the early years of the country’s religious movement. MTI, however, was the most prominent group

⁴ John L. Esposito and John O. Voll, *Makers of Contemporary Islam*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2001, 95.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Azzam S. Tamimi, op. cit, 22.

⁷ Mohamed Elkabi Hermassi quoted in Marion Boulby, “The Islamic Challenge: Tunisia since Independence,” *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (April 1988): 599.

but differed with them as a result of al-Ghannouchi's open commitment to democracy as a viable "method of preventing those who govern from permanently appropriating power for their own ends." In other words it "is a system of governance in which rulers are held accountable for their actions in the public realm by citizens, acting indirectly through the competition and cooperation of their elected representatives."⁸ He maintained that democracy and Islam were not incompatible and that it was preferable to live in a secular state where freedoms existed rather than a strictly religious state with Shari'a law where freedoms did not exist:

[If] by democracy is meant the liberal model of government prevailing in the West, a system under which the people freely choose their representatives and leaders, and in which there is an alternation of power, as well as freedoms and human rights for the public, then the Muslims will find nothing in their religion to oppose democracy, and it is not in their interest to do so anyway.⁹

The government refused MTT's license to operate as a political party. Undaunted, MTI built a movement based on an emphasis of Tunisia's Islamic-Arab identity and values, which found traction among a diverse cross-section of the population: lawyers, bankers, educators, entrepreneurs, union workers, middle class professionals, and doctors. Its success resulted from growing dissatisfaction and opposition to Bourguiba's repression of dissent and renewed attacks on religion.

Habib Bourguiba, like other autocratic rulers in the Arab world feared Iran's export of its Islamic revolution, regarding it as a threat to his tenure as president-for-life.¹⁰ Bourguiba cracked down on the MTI, arresting and imprisoning many of its members including al-Ghannouchi. This event proved a turning point for the Islamist movement in Tunisia. Al-Ghannouchi asserted that a violent, Iranian-styled revolution was not the answer. Rather, change would be most successful if it came from the bottom up — a slow process that gradually transformed society and used increased political participation and democratic principles to bring about a desire goal: a state that was both Islamic in nature, and democratic.¹¹

The crackdown snowballed into a full-blown attack on Islamists and against expressions of religion in the public square. The government banned civil servants from praying during work hours and closed mosques it had opened previously to buffer "leftist extremism."¹² Public institutions were ordered not to hire back Islamists who had lost their jobs during the 1981-84 incarceration. Women wearing the veil were barred from the universities and workplaces. Islamist university students were expelled and drafted into the military. Taxi drivers caught wearing neatly trimmed beards — the mark par excellence of the Islamist — or listening to Islamist cassettes had their

⁸ Azzam S. Tamimi, op. cit., 84.

⁹ John L. Esposito and John O. Voll, *Makers of Contemporary Islam*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2001, 114.

¹⁰ John L. Esposito, *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?* New York: Oxford University Press, 1999, 167–9.

¹¹ Ibid., 167.

¹² Linda G. Jones, "Portrait of Rachid al-Ghannouchi," *Middle East Report*, Vol. 18, No. 153 (July-August 1988): 22.

beards cut and their licenses revoked.¹³

In August of 1987, al-Ghannouchi was arrested again and tried before the state security court, accused of inciting violence and conspiring against the government. When the courts sentenced al-Ghannouchi to life imprisonment at hard labor, Bourguiba, furious, immediately ordered a new trial, confirming suspicions that he wanted al-Ghannouchi executed and the MTI eradicated.

Islamist groups, however threatening, ultimately proved not to be the major threat to Bourguiba's reign. Prime Minister Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, a long-time protégé, former general and Minister of Interior who had presided over government crackdowns on Islamist groups, like the MTI, led a bloodless *coup d'état* on 7 November 1987, claiming that the 84-year old "Supreme Combatant" and "President for Life" was senile and incapable of performing his national duties.¹⁴

The Ben Ali Presidency

The initial months of Ben Ali's arrival on scene looked promising democratic reforms. He went on a public pilgrimage to Mecca, incorporated religious language into his speeches, and reopened the theological faculty at Zaytouna. In response to Ben Ali's requirement that no party could monopolize Islam, MTI agreed to change its name in December of 1988 to Ennahda. However, towards the end of 1988, Tunisians soon realized that their new leader and his reforms were not so new after all.

In April of 1989, during Tunisia's first multi-party (rather than single party) presidential elections, the ruling Party (Democratic Constitutional Rally also referred to it by its French initials RCD) as expected, averaged about 1.7 million votes; all of its candidates were elected. However, stunningly, despite the fact that Ennahda was not granted party status, second place went to Independent candidates, backed by Ennahada, who received over 17 percent of the nationwide vote, and in urban areas won more than 30 percent. Inside Ben Ali's elite circle, some argued that it was time for the president to stop flirting with the Islamists and crush and eliminate them once and for all. A political crackdown seemed imminent and fearing the outcome, in May of 1989, al-Ghannouchi and key supporters fled to Tunisia for London (others to France) where he lived in self-imposed exile for twenty-one years.

Fearing that war in the Gulf (precipitated by Saddam Hussein's invasion and occupation of Kuwait in 1990) would aggravate regional stability and reunify the splintered Ennahada, Ben Ali preemptively moved to suppress it. February of 1991, authorities accused Ennahada of being behind an arson attack on the ruling party's offices, and after that, of a plot to overthrow the government entirely. In May, security forces in concert with the military claimed to have unearthed a large arsenal of weapons that Islamists had concealed as part of a violent scheme against Ben Ali. Ennahada officially repudiated the attack and the government could not prove that the group was responsible. Human rights organizations criticized the regime for making their claims

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ L. Carl Brown, "Bourguiba and Bourguibism Revisited: Reflections and Interpretations," *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 55, No. 1 (Winter 2001): 43–4.

about the weapons stash of flimsy evidence. Two hundred and seventy-nine members were tried by a military tribunal and given prison sentences from fifteen years to life.

The Fall of Ben Ali and Reemergence of Ennahda in Tunisia

Despite Ben Ali's seeming iron grip, the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi on 17 December 2010 triggered a civil resistance movement that spread across Tunisia rapidly and led with astonishing speed to his overthrow after 23 years in power on 14 January 2011. The Tunisian example inspired similar actions in Egypt, Libya, Syria, Bahrain and elsewhere in the Arab world. Street protests were sparked by high unemployment, poor living conditions, food inflation, and government corruption. Protestors demanded political freedom, democracy, freedom of speech, and political freedoms.

Where Was Ennahda?

As discussed earlier, was that Ennahda had been excluded from participation in party politics, forced underground, and many of the movement's most influential leaders, like al-Ghannouchi, were in exile overseas. But if this was the case, "Why did Ennahada perform so strongly in elections? How could a group that was disconnected from the thrust of the revolution sweep in at the eleventh hour and win?" The overthrow of Ben Ali left a vacuum in leadership. A one party state, Tunisia lacked alternative political parties. Many rushed to fill the vacuum, creating an astonishing number of political parties, most lacking a strong base, political program platform and political organization. Ennahda to the surprise of many in Tunisia, Europe, and America emerged as the major political party.

Though dormant, Ennahda was not dead, as many had presumed. When al-Ghannouchi returned home to Tunisia in January of 2011, the movement reemerged. Al-Ghannouchi and Ennahda had a long history as the primary opposition to Bourguiba and Ben Ali and bore the battle scars that gave them popular legitimacy. It had a charismatic leader and symbol and other dedicated leaders and members, a program and grass roots following. In the absence of comparably strong political parties and the emergence of so many new but weak parties, they were able to sweep elections, handily defeating the main challengers.

Al-Ghannouchi's years in exile provided him with the space to read widely and reflect, to refine his understanding of democracy, its diversity, potential applications in the Arab world and Tunisia in particular, and to return home in 2011 with a sense of the direction the country needed to go. His pre-election promise that neither he nor Ennahda would participate in the presidential elections and promised that if Ennahda were to win, it would reach out to other political parties to form a coalition government. Ennahda's platform reflected al-Ghannouchi's long held progressive positions, advocating political reforms, and democracy, a civil state marked by equality of citizenship, political pluralism and inclusion, pluralism freedoms and human rights. As a result, Ennahda attracted votes from its followers and many others.

With a turnout rate of more than 50 percent in the October 2011 elections, the plurality of Tunisians — some 40 percent — cast their ballots for Ennahda, taking 90 of 217 seats in the new National Constituent Assembly nine months after the ouster of dictator. The party was the strongest by far in the legislature and following its electoral promise, moved immediately reached out to the three runner-ups to form a coalition government; two accepted, the Congress for the Republic and Ettakatol aka Democratic Forum for Labor and Liberties.

In 2014, the political landscape of the Arab world has led some to question whether the “Arab Spring” has become an “Arab Winter” in Libya, Bahrain, Syria, and Egypt. Although Tunisia and Egypt had seemed to show signs of initial success in holding the first truly democratic elections in their history, only Tunisia has survived. The 3 July 2013 military-led coup in Egypt toppled the democratically elected government of Mohammed Morsi and moved quickly to declare the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization. Tunisia, despite pitfalls and challenges on the rocky road of democratization, has produced and ratified its new constitution on 27 January 2014. The next stage is general elections to be held likely by the end of 2014.

Transitioning to democracy, however, remains a work in progress that will require a concerted effort by all stakeholders. The practical challenges of establishing a functioning democracy after decades of authoritarianism are made more difficult by the diverse and contending political actors and parties, the ideological tensions and conflicts between Ennahda and secular opposition parties as well as militant Salafi extremists, economic and social problems that were root causes of the uprising in 2011: rising unemployment, regional inequalities, and corruption.

Given the central role Rachid al-Ghannouchi and Ennahda have played in the birth of a nascent democracy in Tunisia, Nouredine Jebnoun’s extensive and wide ranging interview with al-Ghannouchi provides an important reference document. It reveals al-Ghannouchi’s perspective on the “Arab Spring,” political Islam in the Middle East, his reflections on the origins and development of Ennahda, and its relations with the United States and European Union. It sheds light on the accomplishments and identifies many challenges facing Ennahda, political parties and groups, and the Tunisian people on the road in forging national unity and viable democratic civil state and system of governance.

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Dr. Nouredine Jebnoun interviewing Sheikh Rachid al-Ghannouchi, head of Tunisia's Ennahda Movement, in his house in Tunis on 9 January 2014

Nouredine Jebnoun: Your graciousness Sheikh, after more than two decades of forced exile from Tunisia; you have returned to the country and have been living here for almost three years. How do you compare your differing experiences of forced exile from Tunisia with your current experience of resuming public life in Tunisia and engaging in the political process — a process that has evolved as a result of the elections, held on the 23 October 2011, and has led to the establishment of the National Constituent Assembly (NCA)?

Sheikh Rachid al-Ghannouchi: The experience, which the Ennahda Movement and I went through, was difficult and encompassed many obstacles, but it has finally come to a successful conclusion while achieving its goals. When Ben Ali came to power and declared his commitment to democracy, and “no more oppression,” he laid the foundations for a democracy that would exclude no one. Given these declarations, he said he would restore the prestige of the Islamic-Arab identity. Resultantly, we decided to support him and give him an opportunity. In April 1989, we had legislative elections that served as the first test for Ben Ali to fulfill his promises. We participated in those elections and achieved more than we had hoped. We thought we would obtain no more than 20 percent of the votes, but to our surprise, we got the majority of votes (more than 30 percent in many major urban areas). However the results of the elections were falsified at the national level. We were the only party to announce that the elections were forged at a large scale. Ben Ali did not forgive us for disclosing the false ballot count. Consequently, he decided to punish the winners by eradicating

them. Under democracy, winning elections puts the winners in power, but under a dictatorship, winning is a major crime, punishable by eradication. Within Ben Ali's political system: Ennahda was subjected to systematic eradication for 23 years.

Our plan was to replace Ben Ali's regime with a democratic regime. We continued pushing for that, and inadvertently, Ben Ali helped us in the process by blocking all channels of communication and dialogue. He left us no room for reconciliation. What Ben Ali did in this regard was positive — and he should have the credit for it. Because of Ben Ali's intransigence, he did not leave room for disagreement to fester within our movement. Since he refused opportunities for reconciliation, our movement's members did not experience internal divisions between those who wanted to reconcile with the regime, and those who did not. This forced us to have unity within our movement. By closing the door for political bargaining, the regime helped the movement to remain unified. Alternatively, bargaining could have torn the movement apart and threatened its coherence, especially considering how bargaining with Ben Ali was based on deceit. Based on my experience with him, I knew that he was not truthful, and he would never be. Ben Ali's behavior towards us, as a movement, helped us to maintain our unity; it even made us more radical in dealing with his regime by working for a radical change as a revolutionary concept. Personally, I called for this consistently during the last 20 years, even though my rhetoric was sometimes not supported by the movement's institutions. Nonetheless, calling for radical political and institutional change remained as the general trend within the movement since we lost hope in reforming Ben Ali's regime.

Noureddine Jebnoun: Did you negotiate with Ben Ali?

Sheikh Rachid al-Ghannouchi: We did not have any negotiations. During the 22-year period, the only contact with Ben Ali's regime was through the Tunisian Ambassador to Switzerland. I believe this was in 2004 or 2005, and it took the form of a meeting between some brothers representing the movement and the regime's representatives. There were no negotiations in that meeting; it was just an expression of goodwill from both sides to lay the groundwork for reconciliation. Unfortunately, the regime's representatives left that meeting and did not come back. There were no follow up meetings. It was an orphaned meeting and made us question the seriousness of the regime in turning a new page in its relations with the movement. Nothing came out of this meeting. It was a meaningless action, in that the regime initiated communication then closed the communication channels for good without giving any justification. After that meeting, the regime tried to contact us many times. However, the efforts to communicate with us were mainly on security issues and individualistic in nature. Over time, their purpose in communicating with us demonstrated that their main goal was to entice some members of the movement to return to Tunisia in an effort to dismantle the movement and control what the government considered marginalized, weak groups making noise abroad after the movement had been suppressed domestically through the security oppression. In this regard, the regime used the "self-preservation" policy with some members of the movement, where those

individuals would be allowed to have Tunisian passports, be able to resolve their personal problems, and which would entice them to return to Tunisia. In return, those individuals would withdraw from the movement and denounce it for using violence. The nature of Ben Ali's regime's relations with the movement was based on refusing to deal politically with the Ennahda and trying to weaken it through the "self-preservation" policy, which was aimed at destroying the movement. The aim of the security actions was to dismantle what remained of the movement after the regime had managed to suppress the movement across the country. For 23 years of Ben Ali's rule, the movement's members were scattered in 27 prisons inside Tunisia and in 50 states abroad. Despite all of that oppression, the movement managed to maintain a degree of coherence. Thanks to the existence of Ennahda's organized institutions outside who worked to counter the prevalence of prison and oppression that was characteristic of Ben Ali's regime. The mission of the movement abroad was not limited to only finding humanitarian aid, but it also extended to maintaining the momentum of peaceful struggle against autocracy in order to keep our just cause alive. We believed we had a political issue, an issue of oppression. But Ben Ali's regime continued to portray Ennahda as a terrorist organization by trying to convince the world, in particular the states which granted us asylum, that we had a terrorist agenda and, thereby, had nothing to do with peaceful political action. Ben Ali's strategy did not acknowledge differences and diversity within the Islamic movements. He considered them all radicals and conflated moderates and reformers with terrorists. Ben Ali was convinced that Islamists are disingenuous, and that in reality they are radical terrorists. After the September 2001 attacks, Ben Ali worked hard to throw us under the bulldozers of the "Global War on Terror" seeking to destroy us completely. He submitted forged records to intelligence agencies all over the world in order to place us on the list of the organizations sponsoring terrorism. However, he completely failed. Members of the movement, who took refuge in some Arab countries, were kicked out and became refugees in Europe and in North and South America. Many of them legalized their refugee's status; many obtained citizenship. They studied and did business in those countries while remaining as loyal members of the movement, defending their just cause, which they believed was basically a political cause aimed at establishing a democratic regime to replace a dictatorship.

In the same vein, Ennahda succeeded in communicating with the Tunisian opposition –with which Ben Ali had managed in his first decade in power (1990s) to sever Ennahda's relations. He had managed to convince the majority of the modernists among the opposition, especially the ones who were misled, that there is a war against terrorism, and that it is necessary to support his regime to combat the danger posed by political Islam to the civil society, modernization and its gains, as well as democracy as a concept and practice. Therefore, those opposition members joined Ben Ali in his eradication project. But in the last 10 years of Ben Ali's regime, we managed to communicate with the Tunisian opposition. The dialogue developed from a state of suspicion and zero communication into a state of common convictions, embodied in the 18 November 2005 agreement. That agreement served as the platform for the troika that is now running the country.

Noureddine Jebnoun: Why, every time you referred to the tri-party Ennahd-led-coalition, do you use the term “troika”? This is a Russian term, used for the first time under Stalin’s rule, and it means specifically a three-judge committee related to the intelligence apparatus, called “Cheka” and changed later on to “NKVD.” Those judges used to issue arbitrary sentences against innocent persons in the context of the purge campaign implemented between 1934 and 1939. After that, the term’s meaning was expanded to cover the post Nikita Khrushchev era, when the government was run by a troika comprised of Leonid Brezhnev, Nikolai Podgorny, and Alexei Kosygin. Why is there an insistence on the use of a term that implies totalitarianism and dictatorship in a country that is assumed to have rid itself of authoritarianism and that is trying to build a political system governed by institutions and the rule of law?

Sheikh Rachid al-Ghannouchi: The term was used without thinking of its implications. It is possible that the individual, who started using this term, did not pay attention to the background of the term, and he wanted to give a short name to the “tri-party coalition.” Although I agree with you that such a term is inconsistent with the concept of the democratic path on which Tunisia is moving, I assure you that Tunisia is being run jointly by the tri-party coalition, not by three individuals. Politicians found the term easy to use, therefore it became widely used without examining its meaning.

Noureddine Jebnoun: Azzam Tamimi, in his book entitled “*Rachid Ghannouchi: A Democrat within Islamism (Religion and Global Politics)*” (2001), analyzed Rachid al-Ghannouchi’s thinking and introduced him as a leader in the thinking of “enlightened modern political Islam,” who believes in democracy, political pluralism, and the compatibility of Islam and democracy. He also discussed your thoughts on the relation between the state and religion, and the importance of the civil society and its independence from the state in a democratic system that acknowledges the right to disagree with others and does not eliminate them. These progressive thoughts, which differentiate you from many schools of political Islam, made many observers of the Islamic movements consider you an exceptional case in political Islam. To what extent is this true?

Sheikh Rachid al-Ghannouchi: This book is the product of a number of sessions and meetings with the author. Professor John Keane, the supervisor of the author’s thesis, suggested that the author meet with me. Azzam Tamimi’s research initially intended to analyze the phenomenon of political Islam in the Arab world. Although I did not know John Keane—and I met him only one time—he hinted to Tamimi that a thesis on Rachid al-Ghannouchi’s thinking would have an important impact within the academic community and the public. I communicated with John Keane through a translator because English language was new to me. After that, I started meeting with Tamimi face to face, and he started collecting most of my articles and books that were published in Arabic. In particular, he collected my book, “Public Freedoms in the Islamic State,” printed in Beirut in 1993. After years of work and research, Tamimi managed to put his thesis together. That thesis was the first academic study published

in the English language in which the author introduced a critical, scientific study of a specific line of thinking in political Islam represented by Rachid al-Ghannouchi.

Noureddine Jebnoun: Did you believe that the Tunisian people would rise up one day against authoritarianism and that the dictator would flee the country as a result? Had you felt that the society would revolt one day as a result of repression? Or did you think, like many observers, that the regime would renew itself internally, i.e. power balances and power centers within the regime would control the process of “change”?

Sheikh Rachid al-Ghannouchi: At most, I had very little hope that Ben Ali’s regime would change internally. Therefore, we were working for change by pressure. That is, effecting change on the street, not by talking to Ben Ali and trying to find common ground with him, because, as a movement, we believed that changing the regime from within was impossible. There is a set of unpublished documents, which could serve as core material for a book on the “Revolutionary Dimension in al-Ghannouchi’s thinking.”

Noureddine Jebnoun: But political Islam does not have a revolutionary dimension!

Sheikh Rachid al-Ghannouchi: There are relatively recent articles referencing revolution — you can look them up. Those articles were published in the years preceding the revolution, the years 2007 to 2010. For example, on the 2008 Gafsa mining basin riots; on the spark of Sidi Bouzid revolt in December 2010; and an article published in 2009 on *Aljazeera.net*, about the Ben Guerdane uprising. All these articles had a persuasive tone calling on all strata of Tunisian society to support these marginalized oppressed provinces and to not abandon them to face the regime alone. Furthermore, the articles reflected on how abandoning the marginalized would provide an opportunity for the regime to isolate these provinces and suppress them by force. For example, on 12 January 2011, I called Mr. Ahmed Nejib Chebbi, the leader of the Democratic Progressive Party, a friend and militant, who had suggested the establishment of a coalition government with Ben Ali remaining in power. I told Mr. Chebbi, “You have a future, do not waste it” on these maneuvers and bargains. I also told him, “Do not be Tunisia’s Shapour Bakhtiar.” Chebbi responded, “The problem with Bakhtiar was that he came late.” I told him, “There is no time left to save what can be saved,” Ben Ali would fall and there was no other way. I saw things so clearly; this regime had reached the dead-end and had no choice but to step down by the hook or the crook. I expressed that clearly on the night of 13 January 2011, before Ben Ali’s final speech — when I was in Kuwait to participate in a forum — when *Aljazeera TV* station called and asked me, “What do you expect from Ben Ali’s speech?” I responded, “We believed you on 7 November 1987, and you lied to us. Leave. We cannot believe you this time.” I did not falter or hesitate. Upon reflection, I was not wary that Ben Ali would remain in power or an alliance could be made with him. However, in general, I am not saying that the movement’s path was a revolutionary

one in the full meaning of the term, or that it was counting on revolution, because the movement's documents and rhetoric do not reveal that. For Ennahda, all of our rhetoric reveals that we were always instigating against Ben Ali's regime. Our rhetoric was critical and always left room for reconciliation with the regime—despite how that margin was getting narrower—as noted by the head of the movement. Therefore, the movement's institutions were always blaming the head of the movement because he was always deviating from the movement's official policy, which called always for leaving a margin for reconciliation with Ben Ali's regime.

Noureddine Jebnoun: With the head of the regime fleeing, personally, I do not believe what happened in Tunisia was a revolution in the traditional meaning of the term. Rather, it is closer to an uprising led to preserve the perpetual functioning of profoundly opaque and undemocratic institutions in their traditional forms and to entrench as well as empower the state bureaucracy. This did and still does, by the patterns of their performance, constitute a continuation of the previous regime. Although the revolution path necessitates a complete break from the previous regime in thinking and in practice, this did not happen yet. However, one can say the political process you were engaged in created new dynamics. What do you think of the political situation in Tunisia, the political elite, and the society as a whole under the successive governments since 14 January 2011 (the governments of Mr. Mohamed Ghannouchi, the government of Mr. Beji Caid Essebsi, the government of Mr. Hamadi Jebali, and the government of Mr. Ali Larayedh)? As an Islamic movement, did you expect certain outcomes and did you find yourselves dealing with situations that you did not expect or that you did not take into consideration? Did the Tunisian society accept your approach to the identity issue?

Sheikh Rachid al-Ghannouchi: I never doubted the authenticity of the Tunisians during the 22 years of exile. I was sure the people who gave us the majority of votes in 1989 elections would not change just because they were under the rule of a corrupt dictator who imposed himself on them by coercion as an absolute master. The people may have to be silent, but genuine people do not change their loyalty under the influence of power, threats, and pressure. There was no good reason that compelled the Tunisian people to accept the tyrannical system under the previous regime. Ben Ali was not a great author, philosopher, clergyman, or leader like Habib Bourguiba. He does not have any charisma which would make the Tunisian people respect him, except for the big stick which he used to terrorize the Tunisians. His era was characterized by corrupting some of the politicians, thinkers, artists and writers. He also corrupted the media. Ben Ali corrupted the elite but he failed to corrupt the Tunisian people. Therefore, I was certain the moment Ben Ali lose power there would be no real competitor for Ennahda. I was convinced that people do not change direction under the force of power and threat, and loyalty to Ennahda would remain until it is put to the test. If the people find Ennahda is not trust worthy, then they will change their opinion. I believed the minute the tyranny fell; there would be no real competitor for Ennahda because the “Democratic Constitutional Rally” party represented nothing in the political equation of the previous regime, and it was just

a security or intelligence tool, not a political party in the traditional sense. It did not have thoughts, ideology or mission. Personally, I wished that this party had not dissolved so we could defeat it in elections, but it had to be stripped of all its assets, such as its offices, financial holdings, etc. which the party usurped from the Tunisian people. This party has the right to compete using its own resources, not the resources of the state and people. Furthermore, the reception given to me by the people when I returned from exile was not surprising, and the results we achieved in the NCA elections were less than what I expected. However, this was due to the bad electoral law, drafted by what is called “The High Commission for the Realization of the Objectives of the Revolution, Political Reform, and Democratic Transition,” which tried to control the political future of Tunisia by developing an electoral law unfair to Ennahda. But in the end, we accepted that law because we were working to establish participatory political legitimacy and we were not planning to monopolize the political process. Had we won with the absolute majority of votes, we would have become arrogant, and we would not have seen it as necessary to share the power with others, and this does not serve the best interest of Tunisia. We reiterated to all political parties that, regardless of the election’s results, we are calling for Islamic parties and secular parties to share power because this is the reality in the country and we cannot ignore it. The elite associated with the secular parties have important positions within Tunisian administration, media, economy, and in most important fields in the country. There was a positive dimension to what had happened. It forced us to make alliances with others in a government coalition, and that is what Tunisia needs. The country does not need a one party system, and replacing a dominant party with another dominant party is unacceptable, even if it is done through a democratic process.

After 20 years, we do not feel the people are foreign to us, or that we are foreign to them. It is true that a new generation has grown up differently from my generation, as well as from other generations that I knew and dealt with before I left the country at the end of the 1980s. However, one can tell that Tunisia has become a society of consumption over the last two decades. The society has become more open and consumes more, —borrowing from the financial institutions has become the main characteristic of Tunisians. The Tunisian society, like other Arab and Middle Eastern societies, consumes more than it produces, and this why the Tunisians are suffering hardship, are ill at ease, and are under psychological pressure, because they are living at a level beyond their resources due to the life pattern which was imposed on them by the media and the openness to consumer societies. Tunisians also are in constant conflict between preserving their Islamic-Arab identity and accepting the values coming to them with globalization. In general, Tunisians are keen to convince themselves that they are still Muslims and yet they are very keen to live in an era not governed by Islamic values, and this is another reason for tension.

Noureddine Jebnoun: Don’t you think that identity is a manufactured fictitious issue—especially since some leverage the Tunisian people’s background and their classification to establish fixed identities, such as Phoenicians, Berbers, Arabs, Muslims, Francophones, Islamists, seculars, leftists, liberals, etc.? They are Tunisians,

and no political party should be allowed to exploit the Islamic-Arab identity for political purposes. This could affect the coherence of Tunisian society and cause fragmentation. Isn't?

Sheikh Rachid al-Ghannouchi: The secular background of the Tunisian elite was formed under special circumstances during the colonial era: a foreign force invaded a segment of the Tunisian society, interfered in its lifestyle, and transformed this segment into political elite, who were controlled by those in power. Therefore, two societies operated in parallel in Tunisia: that of the countryside, an old rural society which used all of its power to preserve the traditional values on which it was raised and grew; and a modern society of special idiosyncrasies represented in the French way of modernization, which faces specific problems with regard to its relationship with religion. These problems vary between societies and are not the same in other secular ones. The word “laïcité” does not mean secularism. In Britain, for example, there is a queen who represents the church and she is the “Defender of the Faith and Supreme Governor of the Church of England,” while France prohibits Muslim French females, citizens and immigrants, from wearing hijab in public places. The hijab has not created a problem in any European country except for France. This deep-rooted enmity toward anything related to religion originated in the Caesarean birth of the French state and in its struggle with the church. The French state considered itself the maker of the nation, not an expression of it, and it is the guardian of its identity. That is in contrast to the British state, which is an expression of its pluralism (English, Scotch, Irish, and Walsh); the British state is the result of this pluralism. France does not allow the establishment of a royal party because it is believed that such a party constitutes a threat to the republic and undermines its foundations. Therefore, freedom has certain limits that it should not exceed, taking into consideration that the state is considered the official guardian of identity. The Tunisian elite was cast within this French mold, making its coexistence with Islam difficult, especially with Islam regarding inclusiveness. Islam does not accept to be reduced to an individual creed practiced in the narrow space left by the state — especially if it follows the French model. The Muslims understanding of monotheism means Islam is the center of life and God is the supreme authority, which means Islam is religion, worldliness and state (*Din, Dunyā wa Darwla*). Therefore, coexistence of those two views of the role of Islam in the Tunisian society is not easy; as if the society is made up of two nations living as one nation. Ennahda worked on its exegesis of Islam to maximize tolerance in order to achieve a formula of coexistence with the moderates on the other side and worked to consider the conflict not as an identity or ideological conflict but as a political conflict between two extremisms: secular extremism and Islamic extremism. The country belongs to all its citizens at equal footing, it is comprised of all its citizens on the basis of citizenship, and nobody can claim to be the trustee of this country. Accepting this idea is not easy for everyone — in particular, the extremists in the Tunisian society. Each side, the Islamic extremism as well as the secular extremism, claims that they have a mission and seek to impose it on the majority of the people. In spite of these extremisms, most of the Tunisian people adhere to the concept of citizenship, which is based on peaceful coexistence in one home country, which is

large enough for all despite their religious differences. For example, secular extremism does not respect the feelings of the majority, who are Muslims, when they consider fasting in Ramadan as an individual ritual that should not affect the society's lifestyle during that month. This exemplified the opinion of the late President Bourguiba, who ordered the people not to fast because he believed Tunisians' fasting would have a negative effect on the country's productivity cycle and overall economy. In 1958 during Ramadan, when I was in secondary school, the institute's administration refused to give us our food immediately after sunset, which was around 5 pm, to break our fast. They tried to force us to have dinner at the scheduled time during the school year, which was 8 pm and three hours after sunset. Also, *Subhoor* (pre-dawn meal) was forbidden by the institute's administration. This indicates a lack of understanding on the part of the state of Tunisia, represented at that time by its educational institutions, that the month of Ramadan changes the lifestyle of the society, and that the state and all its institutions should take such temporary, lifestyle changes into consideration. This is a form of guardianship that the state of Tunisia, under Bourguiba's rule, tried to impose on the Tunisians — without any consideration of their religious sensitivities and values — in order to say that Tunisian society is “civilized” and “modern.”

Noureddine Jebnoun: Sheikh al-Ghannouchi is seen as a pioneer of the “realistic” school of political Islam; while some leaders in the Ennahda Movement, such as Sheikh Abdel Fattah Morou, are portrayed as part of the “Islamic renewal and reform” school. Sheikh Sadok Chourou is associated with the “traditional conservative” current in the movement. And it is believed that the “traditional conservative” trend constitutes the majority of the Muslim Brotherhood membership in Egypt. Therefore, the main criticism directed at the Muslim Brotherhood is that they did not evolve in their societal and political project and failed to be as “realistic” as Sheikh Rachid al-Ghannouchi. What do you think of this argument?

Sheikh Rachid al-Ghannouchi: You cannot separate any thinking from its environment and background. What is good for Egypt is not necessarily good for Tunisia, and vice versa. Therefore, our thinking is not disconnected from our needs, and we judge this thinking based on its ability to solve society's problems and navigate pathways out of trouble. Hence, I believe the Egyptian elite failed to manage its internal dialogue. It does not matter who was responsible for the failure, but practically there is a failure. When the citizens of the homeland kill each other, this means that the elite failed because it could not prevent fighting among the country's citizens. Internal fighting is a failure at its prime. Most likely, all parties jointly share the responsibility for failure, but in different proportions. In this context, I would like to remember Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) saying: “The killer and the killed both will go to hell.” Conversely in Tunisia, we protected the country from this fate, and that was a joint responsibility where Ennahda collaborated with the other political parties to help Tunisia avoid a tragedy similar to that of Egypt. The credit goes to all, but also in different proportions. If it is not arrogant, I can say Ennahda has a bigger share in this credit because it was in power and decided to give it up voluntarily without going for elections or as a result of a revolution or military coup. We decided to give up

power through a compromise. We decided to give up power, which we got through fair democratic elections that were acknowledged by the world. We did not give it up by mere force, but there was pressure from the other political parties because, at the end of the day, we are working in the political field, and as you know this field is not a benevolent one. The pressure was not a force majeure because the government had the majority in the NCA and support for Ennahda in the street is larger than that for the others. When we called for a demonstration in Kasbah during Ramadan, 2013, at least a quarter million people responded. This popular mobilization is unprecedented in the history of Tunisia. Therefore, the government was not isolated, but it was enjoying public support. However, I cannot say with certainty that the government was in good standing. The country was suffocating at all levels. Therefore, it was necessary to take a bold step to move the country out of that situation—a situation that could express itself in different forms of violence, such as assassinations and military coups. We tried to avoid pressure that could take an irrational form as miscalculated escalation by some parties that would have led the country to a disaster. Ennahda's behavior was and is still wise one expressed in an objective assessment of the situation that led us to conclude that if we'd continued on this path, all of us would have been losers, and in the final analysis, our country, Tunisia, would suffer the greatest loss. We considered the end goal rather than the immediate party interest. We saw that preserving the power for the party would not serve the country's interest as much as the success of Tunisians' democratic choice. This would lay the foundations for freedom with a constitution based on consensus, opening the way to make Tunisian political life democratic and then to build a democratic system. We believed that if we remained in power, the aforementioned objectives would not be achieved; to the contrary, the opposite might happen. If we remained in power, then that could have led to a civil war in the form of bloody conflicts and military coups. Such a development could be used as pretext for political violence to be the dominant language of discourse in the Tunisian society. Therefore, the country's interest lies in the success of this democratic choice. This choice compelled us to give up power, not because we were coerced, but because we were responsible in prioritizing Tunisia's future.

Noureddine Jebnoun: When Mr. Hamadi Jebali became the head of the fourth transitional government, in which Ennahda participated for the first time, he recited the Qur'anic verse, "Who has fed them against hunger, and has secured them against fear." (Quraysh, 4), which was the title of his government's social and economic program. Then came the government of Mr. Ali Larayedh and his agenda was restoring the state's prestige, the same slogan raised by the previous Prime Minister, Beji Caid Essebsi. The slogan was not associated in practice with the prestige of the Tunisian citizens as much as it was aimed at restoring the authority of the state apparatus—the very apparatus that participated in oppressing the Tunisians and was not yet held accountable! During my visit to the country, in particular to the southern part, I heard from ordinary citizens — not just from some political elite who have made a profession out of criticizing your party — bitter criticism about the way your party and the other parties aligned with it are running the government, and I heard specific complaints. Those citizens accuse Ennahda of seizing power, appointing its

people in important positions, and failing to manage the social and economic fields which made most Tunisians rise up against the previous regime and cause its downfall. What do you think of those who say, “Those who cannot provide security to the Tunisian citizens and protect them from violence which has become rampant in the society, and those who cannot provide general services, such as removing the piles of garbage from the city streets, cannot create jobs and improve the country’s economic situation in general.” In the southern part of the country, the parallel economy/black market, which is based on smuggling to and from Libya, the clandestine migration of unemployed young people to Europe has become the main national activity. In this part of Tunisia, the situation of the inhabitants is worse than it was before 14 January 2011.

Sheikh Rachid al-Ghannouchi: You are describing facts that I do not deny, and you may be describing the reality in the southeastern part of the country. However, in the northern part of the country, despite the worsening economic and social situation, there are many opinion polls confirming that the movement’s popularity in these areas is high, and could exceed 50 to 60 percent of the intended votes. I do not think the movement has played any role in the worsening of the economic and social environment in Tunisia. Does this mean the Tunisians were satisfied with the situation that existed before the fall of the old regime? Had they accepted that situation they would not have risen up against Ben Ali’s regime. The Tunisian people revolted under heavy oppression imposed on them under authoritarianism. Now, there is no oppression supported by autocracy, and this situation must be acknowledged. Tunisians are enjoying a degree of freedom that they never experienced in their recent and current history. This freedom is the main objective for which the Tunisians rebelled against the previous regime and they should preserve it. This freedom is not a gift to the Tunisian people from Ennahda and its allies, but it was the fruit of the sacrifices of the martyrs and prisoners for their dignity and respect. Ennahda preserved this gain even though we paid a price in the form of accepting the irrational behavior of some parties who did not yet accept the concept of freedom and tried to use it as they pleased. Ennahda could have dealt with these situations with force, which would have led to accusations that we were trying to replicate a new form of dictatorship. This form of dictatorship might differ from the previous regime’s authoritarianism in that it would be a soft dictatorship; in the final analysis, it would still be a dictatorship—albeit a ‘soft’ one. Nonetheless, all forms of dictatorship are doomed to failure, and the temptation of power that changes power to arrogance is a disease. If Ennahda were to catch this disease, then it would never recover. The tri-party coalition, led by Ennahda, should be credited for preserving freedom in the country during this critical transition period. For example, this government is persecuted by the media, including the public media; its achievements are unknown and in many cases are intentionally concealed from the public. The media always tries to concentrate on the empty half of the cup — ignoring the government’s efforts to improve Tunisians’ social situations and focusing on negative aspects represented in what has not been achieved. Freedom in Tunisia is an achievement; this outgoing government is laying the foundations for freedom, — not only as wishful thinking, a slogan and practice — but also as a

constitution, through a legislative framework, and with regulatory bodies monitoring each other. In this context, Ennahda suggested the participation of the opposition in the NCA committees' management in order that the governing tri-party coalition not runs these committees alone. Some brethren in the movement questioned me about this suggestion, a suggestion they understood as a major concession to the opposition. My argument was, "who said Ennahda will remain in power?" Therefore, we have to lay the groundwork for the principle of a peaceful rotation of power. Soon we will be in the opposition and those who will be in power will have to share with us power as we shared with our opposition. By sharing power with the opposition, we protect ourselves from the temptation of monopolizing power and arrogance of power. At the same time, power-sharing protects us from the threat of being subjected in the future to exclusion, marginalization, and torture.

As for the economy, the country's economy is not as bad as it is being portrayed in the media. Because of the freedom of expression, everyone is talking about the country's economy. The bad economic situation of Tunisia under the previous regime in its last years was not better than the current situation. There is one important difference, that is the freedom of opinion and expression was muzzled; oppression was the dominant language that no one could oppose, especially inside the country. It is true that the economic indicators, which were regularly highlighted by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund since the fall of the previous regime, were not as we wished, but we have to consider indicators within their general context. Tunisia's economy, which depends on very limited national resources, is not isolated from the international and regional context; Tunisia is affected by this context and, yet, does not affect it to the same degree. The relationship of Tunisia's economy with the European Union's economy, which is experiencing its own recession and an apparent crisis, has a negative effect on the national economy and its growth. i.e., the Spanish or French citizen, who is undergoing a difficult economic situation, is not going to consider coming to Tunisia for tourism as a matter of priority. The tourism sector in our country is one of the strategic sectors in reviving the country's economic cycle. Although the inflation rate has increased, and the citizen's purchasing power has decreased, and those are negative indicators, some citizens do not appreciate that the basic necessities subsidy fund increased: specifically, it has grown from 1.5 billion dinar (US\$0.9bn) as estimated in 2010, to now exceeding 5 billion dinars (US\$3.1bn). This fund helps the citizens, especially those with limited incomes; cope with difficulties caused by high prices. Also, it is worth mentioning that unemployment rates are not going up, but going down, from 18 percent to about 15 percent. In conclusion, one should take into consideration that this is a transition period and the purpose of it is to lay the foundations for a healthy democracy. This outgoing government will be judged as a success or a failure by evaluating its role or lack thereof, in laying the groundwork for the desired democracy through fair, free and transparent upcoming elections.

Noureddine Jebnoun: Why are those who are drafting the constitution insisting on including everything in the text of it? Why are they not instead focusing on drafting a text comprising a set of general principles, leaving it up to future legislators

to legislate for each situation as necessary — especially since societies are dynamic, not static, by their nature — similar to the practice followed by the oldest democracies in the world? Although you are insisting that what took place in Tunisia is a revolution, and not an uprising, how do you explain that those who were entrusted to draft 149 articles of this constitution mentioned the word “revolution” one time only in the preamble? Consider Article 4, which spells out the Tunisian state motto, “Freedom, Dignity, Justice, Order.” It is a mixture of concepts about dignity raised in the face of the previous regime: “jobs, freedom and national dignity,” and the motto that laid down the foundations for the dictatorship in the post independence. Tunisian citizens did not get anything out of this except the oppressive component of “order,” which was and still is, after what you believe is a revolution, a part of the state motto. Don’t you think this is contrary to the spirit of the revolution itself?

Sheikh Rachid al-Ghannouchi: I support the parliamentary system, not the presidential one. Originally, this was Ennahda’s program but we lost to those who are influenced by the French model and the concept of the centralized state. They hold to this concept even though Tunisia is not threatened by separatist tendencies, which could justify resisting our program that calls for a parliamentary system. However, with what was agreed upon in the fourth version of the constitution, the political system that we accepted for the country is closer to the parliamentary system rather than the presidential system. But, the text still has some ambiguity — even some landmines — because mixing the two systems strips them of their advantages.

The state motto is a part of reconciling contradictions necessary for life because the human being is not a one-dimensional creature, but a multi-dimensional creature, who attempts to reconcile these contradictions at various intervals. Therefore, it is not surprising to find in the same motto “freedom” and “order.” We say yes to freedom, but it should be “responsible” freedom. That is, freedom within specified parameters as it is spelled out in the case of Tunisia in the word “order.” Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406), who is the most important author among those who wrote about Arabs, as described in his *Muqaddimah* (An Introduction to History) that they are “a savage nation, fully accustomed to savagery and the things that cause it. Savagery has become their character and their nature.” Thus, the individualistic mentality that encouraged such savagery is very dominant among Arabs. Islam benefited from this characteristic among Arabs based on pride (courage, bravery, and dignity) which sometimes becomes self-conceit. However, this individualistic mind-set does not make civilization unless the people who have this mind-set learn how to live by a system that specifies limits to this mentality. Therefore, it was incumbent upon Islam to create a system capable of building relations among individuals based on the group concept and to caution always against disbanding. This system was aimed at helping the Arabs to transform from the desert culture, which was governed by the strength of tribes’ alliances, to the culture of the city and civilization, which are bound by law and social contracts between the governors and governed. The Arab individual was in need of group loyalty and distancing himself/herself from individualism. In this regard, the importance of the religious inclination represented by Islam can be seen in its important role

in building the social relations. This inclination is a value system that emphasizes the inevitability of developing a system enlisting compliance by all to overcome the individualistic culture in Arab societies — which are extremely individualistic, or nationalistic. Therefore, freedom which is not enforced by a framework of law, society, behavior, or values makes the individual tends to assert his/her own one sided concept of freedom without taking into consideration the interest and values of the society in which he lives.

Noureddine Jebnoun: Ennahda Movement Party: you preserved the word “Movement” together with the word “Party” in the name (Ennahda Movement Party), although a movement, in general, is established as an underground and secret organization, but a party normally has its own announced political framework in which it works. Can the word “Party” and the word “Movement” be reconciled?

Sheikh Rachid al-Ghannouchi: I do not think the terminology has too much of a denotation or a negative connotation because we did not think much about whether we are a party or movement. I believe this combination, Party and Movement, was dictated by law. When we started working legally we were classified as a party and we became a party and we accepted that this situation comprises our previous state as a movement and what we became as a legal party. It is a sort of associating the past with the present. In the past we were established as a movement (the Islamic Tendency Movement). In other words, we started dealing with social work in its missionary, moral, and intellectual concept. Now we have a political dimension. This association combines two stages and implies that we are keeping our promise; we have a comprehensive project, and we are not just a party interested only in power. We are still a social project interested in thought, culture, missionary work, and charitable work, with a political dimension, and we acknowledge that the political dimension has expanded to the extent that it is about to take over the whole project for which the movement was established.

Noureddine Jebnoun: The relationship between Ennahda Movement Party and the different Salafi currents (Revival Salafiyya, Scientific Salafiyya, and Scripturalist Salafiyya) is represented in the parties existing on the Tunisian political arena and is legally recognized [Hizb al-Asāla (Authenticity Party), Jabhat al-Islāh (Reform Front), Hizb al-Rahmah (Mercy Party), and Hizb al-Tahrīr al-Islāmī (Islamic Liberation Party)]. Although the last has an Islamic dimension and does not recognize the national context in which it is operating and calls for reviving caliphate as a project which goes beyond the Tunisian national boundaries to include the umma in its broad comprehensive sense. I would like here to point out that on 5 January 2014, in a public demonstration organized by the Tahrīr Party; the draft constitution was denounced and vilified as an “apostate constitution that represents betrayal to the revolution, the revolutionaries, and the people.” What is the nature of the relationship between Ennahda and these parties whose background is Salafi — given that there are Tunisian political parties who are suspicious of your relation with the Salafis and consider this relationship to be playing a role between your party and these parties,

whom are believed to be in an electoral reserve for Ennahda — although those parties are traditionally “radical militant,” and put Ennahda sometimes in a difficult situation because of the compromises which your party made in drafting the constitution?

Sheikh Rachid al-Ghannouchi: Every effort seeking to define the Islamists as a completely consistent and homogeneous group, even with its apparent differences, is considered mere deceit, role playing, and conspiracy. In short, this is naive and unscientific interpretation of political Islam. To start with, pluralism is a societal and universal law, and any attempt to simplify things and introduce them in a coherent consistent mold, and to say the differences among those currents and parties are artificial is a systematic and scholarly mistake in interpreting pluralism among and within the Islamic movements. Humankind is an entity and a universe at the same time and ignoring the common ground between it and the others is illogical and wrong. Having differences is acknowledged by the Qur’an when it says, “And if your Lord had willed, He could have made mankind one community; but they will not cease to differ. Except whom your Lord has given mercy, and for that He created them” (Hud, 118 and 119). This means God created people different from each other, which is the nature of things. Everything in this universe is multiple and different and absolute unity does not exist. God only is one. The human genius lies in its ability to manage this difference and politics is the ability to manage this difference in a sound, peaceful, and civilized way, without using any brutality to enable the people to coexist despite their differences. This difference can enrich the diversity of life, not an element of destruction, and this is the difference between the civilized and backward people. Civilized people are the people who are able to manage their differences in a civilized and peaceful manner. Backward people fail to do that: they kill each other, and they waste their energy. The difference between Ennahda and the other Islamic movements, including Salafi movements, is a difference in the jurisprudential thinking. This difference is as old as Islam itself, and it appeared when the difference between and within Sunni and Shi’a doctrines came into existence. Ennahda’s jurisprudential thinking follows the Sunni’s interpretation, but the difference within this Sunni’s interpretation even leads to fighting. Ennahda and its partners in the outgoing government were fighting with Sunni Salafi religious groups such as “Ansar Shari’a” (Supporters of Shari’a), who chose the path of violence, and it has its own excessively strict interpretation of the religious texts. This interpretation of the text is aimed at monopolizing the right of explaining it, which means for those organizations that the text has one meaning only, and anybody who disagrees with their exegesis and understanding of it is a disbeliever and godless. But this interpretation does not amount to terrorism. Terrorism means giving someone the right to impose this interpretation on others by coercion. There are Salafi movements who are strict in interpreting the texts but they do not give themselves the utter right to impose this interpretation on the others by force and they accept coexistence with them, although they consider those others have gone astray. But the Salafi movements who believe their understanding of the text is the right one and try to impose this understanding on the society by force, while considering that the society has gone astray, and refusing to coexist with it, their aim is to impose on the society what they believe

it is an absolute truth valid in all places and times. Within the society there is more than one Salafi current, some are strict in their understanding of the text but they are living in peace with the society and accept coexistence with the others. Ennahda has no problem with this category of Salafi. Ennahda coexists with the communists, who are extremists in that they believe they are in the absolute right, but they refrain from violence and accept coexistence among others. Therefore, there is a place in the society for all, with the major exception of those who use violence by bearing arms against the state and the society, or use threats to achieve political purposes.

Noureddine Jebnoun: When what is called “Nidā’ Tūnis” (Call for Tunisia) party was established, Ennahda refused initially to meet with that party because it was an extension of the dissolved “Democratic Constitutional Rally” party. Later on, the Movement changed its position and there were meetings between you and the leaders of “Nidā’ Tūnis,” such as Mr. Beji Caid Essebsi. Can this change in your position be considered an acceptance of the other?

Sheikh Rachid al-Ghannouchi: Meeting and negotiating with “Nidā’ Tūnis” and its members is a part of the political process. It is true that the revolution was against those people because they monopolized representing the society, excluded others by force, and used the state as a tool for oppression. The revolution denied them the right to exist, revoked their license, and some of them were put on trial. The revolution was a peaceful and non-violent one, and the approach of governments that came to power in the aftermath of the revolution was not radical and did not adopt a policy of exclusion, retaliation, and revenge. Ennahda should receive credit for its role in supporting this choice. We did not support a retaliatory revolutionary approach. “Nidā’ Tūnis” and the other parties which were associated with the previous regime had the chance to revive and had renewed hopes to return to power. They started to organize, and Ennahda’s successive governments recognized their various political organizations. After that, Ennahda did not have any reason to justify refusing to deal with them as parties, especially as they were recognized by governments led by Ennahda. Upon reflection, it would have become a sort of contradiction within the Ennahda movement if the Ennahda-led government recognized those parties and the Ennahda party refused to deal with them! Not recognizing these parties became a factor of disturbance and instability in the society because the new political system which existed as a result of the 23 October 2011-elections came into existence in their absence. They were not part of the political equation. But after more than a year, they organized themselves, took advantage of the elite within the bureaucracy of the Tunisian “deep state,” and they became a factor of tension. They then allied themselves with the staunchest enemies of Ennahda, the leftists, and became a factor of precariousness. Therefore, it was necessary to do one of two things: hold new elections to redistribute power because political balance has been disturbed with the emergence of a large party (Nidā’ Tūnis) in the society that was not included in the political calculations; or start a dialogue with this party to ease the situation. Holding new elections was not an option because we needed tools, such as an independent electoral body and constitution, which were not available. Therefore, we decided to

start a dialogue with this party; we believe the dialogue made it easier to de-escalate the situation, which opened the way for the NCA to resume after interrupting its sessions in the summer of 2013. The NCA was entrusted to complete the drafting of the constitution and establish an electoral body to prepare for upcoming elections. All these positive steps were the fruits of this dialogue which was not easy for Ennahda because “Nidā’ Tūnis,” who associates itself with Bourguiba’s legacy, excluded our party for more than 30 years. The decision to accept the dialogue with them was difficult for Ennahda. I took it upon myself to accept the results of that decision because the dialogue initiative was my personal choice and it was discussed and approved by the Ennahda Movement. I also accepted the responsibility for signing the road map.

Noureddine Jebnoun: Did the national dialogue achieve its goal?

Sheikh Rachid al-Ghannouchi: The national dialogue is considered, by Ennahda, as a positive action because its results were accepted by all participating parties. Politics is assessed by results rather than intentions. The dialogue appeased the situation in the country, greatly marginalized the radical extremism — whether it was leftist or Jihadist Salafi — and put the country on the path to elections. Nowadays, the country is witnessing a fair amount of optimism. Our ship did not sink despite the strong winds blowing across Tunisia in the past months, especially after the Egyptian seismic shock.

Noureddine Jebnoun: The political crisis facing political Islam — in more than one country where parties associated with Islam are running the public affairs, such as the crises faced by the Turkish Justice and Development Party — made some believe that those parties, which came to power as a result of those uprisings, are facing what is called the “moment of truth.” Especially since the Egyptian government, which came as a result of the 3 July 2013 coup portrayed the Muslim Brotherhood Movement as a “terrorist” organization. How will Ennahda, whose ideological background is linked to the Muslim Brotherhood, deal with this situation as a reality, given that Tunisia, like all the members of the League of Arab States, is a signatory state of the “Arab Convention against Terrorism,” signed in Cairo on 22 April 1998, and that the Egyptian government officially requested from most Arab countries to put the Muslim Brotherhood on the list of terrorist organizations?

Sheikh Rachid al-Ghannouchi: Tunisia is a member of the League of Arab States, and the League did not adopt this choice. Egypt cannot replace the Arab League. It is true Egypt is the largest Arab country, but it is just one member of the Arab League. Therefore, Tunisia and the other Arab countries are not obligated to accept this decision. Egypt is a sovereign state and can take any decision for itself. This is a right, and no one can deny the state of Egypt this right — whether the other states accept, or reject, such a decision. Egypt has the right to act with sovereignty within its own borders not outside them. Definitely, this decision is not a democratic one. It is an arbitrary decision issued by a coup and no one can deny that the existing

situation is the result of a coup that caused unprecedented bloodshed in the recent history of Egypt. There is unprecedented fascism in Egypt tantamount to madness. Unfortunately, the liberals in Egypt are committing mass suicide. The Wafd party, — who has a respectable history of fighting for democracy and freedom under both the British rules and the Egyptian monarchy, jumped on a tank and allied itself with a dictatorship that assaulted the mosques and directed the muzzles of its machine guns at young men and women. This alliance between the liberals and the military junta is a moral outrage for the Egyptian elite, the artists, the thinkers, and the politicians who made a profession out of writing prose to praise Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. There is a state of hysteria spreading within a segment of the Egyptian elite. Therefore, this decision will not be accepted in Egypt because the Egyptian people proved to the rest of the world that they launched a revolution and are insisting on it. From day one the young Egyptians did not compromise on their right to demonstrate, denounce the coup, and refuse to recognize the state of emergency, despite the threats of harsh oppression. The unprofessional tactics of the Egyptian media did not fool those young people. Nor did it weaken their will and determination in rejecting the *fait accompli* which some wanted to make to an inevitable reality. Egypt is in a long, dark tunnel...

Noureddine Jebnoun: Can the financial corruption scandal within Erdoğan's government in Turkey be considered a crisis of political Islam similar to the crisis of authoritarianism, which led to the fall of some authoritarian regimes following the wave of uprisings in the Arab world since 2011?

Sheikh Rachid al-Ghannouchi: I do not think political Islam in Turkey is going through a crisis, but one can see there is a new situation in Turkey. The Turkish experience was a local one based on economy and development; today it is based on politics and on foreign policy, in particular. Turkish engagement in Middle East politics, which is the center of international conflicts, is recent. Turkey was isolated from its regional environment in the Middle East and it was dealing with it as an economic market according to its “zero problems with neighbors” policy, which was adopted by the state of Turkey as a principle of its foreign policy in dealing with its neighbors. This policy became lately a “zero peace” policy with its neighbors. Turkey got involved in the heart of Middle East conflicts, the Zionism issue in particular. Turkey's problems started when Recep Tayyip Erdoğan clashed with Shimon Peres in the 2009-World Economic Forum in Davos, escalated with the Marmara incident — the result of the Israeli attack on a Turkish ship that was sailing to Gaza with the aim of breaking the siege on Gaza — and it peaked when Erdoğan visited Gaza. When the uprising started in Syria, Erdoğan got engaged fully in the Syrian conflict and through it got engaged in the “Arab Spring.” Turkey became part of the Middle East's new equation. This policy of Erdoğan's government in the Middle East made all the other time-bombs in Turkey explode, i.e.: raising the Alawite issue in Turkey, which was unheard of. But with the interference of Turkey in the Syrian problem, where the Alawites (Nusayris) (sic) are leading a fight against other sects, the domestic ethnic Turkish structure was affected by the fighting in Syria. Turkey became an active and important player in the Middle East conflict and entered into conflict with

all the players in that field, and with the Zionism factor in particular, which is very influential and active in the area. The role of the foreign factor in Turkish policy was as not strong as it is today. As a result, Turkey is burdened with the effect of foreign problems because it stuck its hand in the hornet's nest of Syria, Israel, and Egypt...

Noureddine Jebnoun: Do you think Turkey can be a model for the countries going through a political transition and trying to establish a democracy, such as Tunisia?

Sheikh Rachid al-Ghannouchi: Turkey is a model of economic development in that it achieved growth rates that the advanced countries failed to accomplish. However, the Turkish experience is going into a new field that is the field of regional politics, of which Turkey has never been a participant of until now. Although every country has its own particularities, which determine the nature and pattern of its democratic path, the Turkish model remains an inspirational one to others in that Turkey showed the world that there is no conflict, or incompatibility, between Islam and democracy. However, the contrary is also true: the success of the Turkish model became an incentive to the Islamic countries that are using it as a guide.

Noureddine Jebnoun: Don't you think the so-called "Arab Spring" deepened the sectarian divide in the Arab world? For example, Syria became a model for this sectarianism in-fighting? This is attracting youth who travel from Arab countries, including Tunisia, to fight the regime in Syria, considered an extension of Iran and Shi'a in the Levant area.

Sheikh Rachid al-Ghannouchi: Events in Syria and the area, in general, are an expression of reviving the idea of the continuity of the umma. When the question of Palestine was in the hands of leftist Arabist and nationalist movements, some Tunisian youth were engaged with the "Fatah" Movement, the "Popular Front for Liberation of Palestine," and other armed Palestinian organizations. The fighters used to come from all over the world, including Japan, to support the people of Palestine under the idea of universal humanism, which is a progressive idea. The youth were participating in the armed struggle, sacrificing their lives for the sake of this idea and to achieve their concept of humanity. Now there is fighting going on in Syria in the name of Islam. Regardless of the legality of this fighting, it is being launched in the name of a universal humanism and it is attracting those young people — as it attracted others before them in the sixties and seventies of the twentieth century.

Noureddine Jebnoun: Let us assume that those young people go back to their countries, as in the case of Tunisia for example, they will represent a threat for the security and stability of the country...what are your thoughts?

Sheikh Rachid al-Ghannouchi: Had I been consulted about the legality of their travel to Syria I would not have approved it because the dimensions of this battle are not clear and many parties and players are interfering in it. As the saying goes, the banner is not clear. The banners are conflicting, and Islamic groups are fighting each

other nowadays. The Tunisians who went to Syria find themselves fighting a battle different from the battle they went to fight. The battle which was against al-Asad's regime became battle among the various groups (Al-Nusra Front for the People of Levant, the Islamic State in Iraq and Levant, the Free Army, etc.). This is the same situation faced by those who went to Afghanistan to fight the Soviets in the early 1980s, but later they found themselves involved in an Afghan civil war, where the Arab fighters were fighting Ahmad Shah Massoud and other warlords...

Noureddine Jebnoun: What do you say to the Tunisian youth who were the vanguard of the popular uprising?

Sheikh Rachid al-Ghannouchi: I say to the Tunisian youth, have mercy for your revolution and your country. To aspire for justice, freedom, and advancement is a characteristic of youth. However, those ambitions should be realistic, i.e., achievable, in order to become a reality. Islam is an ideal religion and directs the individual to achieve lofty ideals, but it is also a realistic religion: "Allah does not charge a soul except with that within its capacity. It will have the consequence of what good it has gained, and it will bear the consequence of what evil it has earned." (The Cow, 286), and God says: "So fear Allah as much as you are able" (The Mutual Disillusion, 16), which means that: even in fearing the Creator, there is idealism and realism. For example, the youth should avoid trapping themselves in unachievable ideals. Therefore, mobilizing individuals for the purpose of achieving an ideal justice is an illusion that remains difficult to realize. Tunisia is a small country with limited natural resources and its economy is closely associated, over 80 percent, with the European Union's economy. Therefore, one cannot treat Tunisia as if it is a great power enjoying a full economic and military independence... We have relative independence, which could be increased and could be compromised. We should have mercy for this small country in order to open progressively towards the umma, because the Islamic umma is an ideal concept, but it is not a reality. It does not exist as a political entity upon which we can rely. The economic correlation between Tunisia and the umma does not exceed 2 percent. The umma as a political reality is a very limited case. Therefore, we cannot adhere to an idealism that causes us to disregard the reality and its challenges.

Noureddine Jebnoun: Your relations with the United States show that there were meetings in 2006 between Ennahda leaders and representatives of the US Embassy in Tunis. This included one meeting in the same year with Mr. Hamadi Jebali after he was released from prison, and later there were other meetings between members from Ennahda and representatives of the US Embassy. How did this relationship between you and the United States develop?

Sheikh Rachid al-Ghannouchi: We were always keen to maintain our relations with the Western world. We took refuge in the European Union, the United States, and Canada following the systematic oppression we were subjected to by Ben Ali's regime. Although we took refuge initially in some Arab countries, such as Algeria, Sudan, and Saudi Arabia, but then as Ben Ali increased his pressure to marginalize

us in the Arab world. Some of us were jailed in Arab countries; others were handed to Ben Ali's government while some managed to escape to Europe and the Western world. We found ourselves in the West where we were treated in accordance with the Humanitarian Laws, including the "United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees." There we got acquainted with the "Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees." This body was a foreign entity for us, but the reality imposed this situation on us. It was a warm-up lap for us, and it gave us protection and the right to live under minimum decent living conditions. In the past 20 years, we have about 2,000 Ennahda members as refugees in the Western world. This situation had a great deal of influence on the restructuring of the movement as well as deepening the idea of pluralism, coexistence with the others, and the importance of democracy. We were protected by Western governments and we were keen to maintain good relationships with most Western countries despite the pressure put by Ben Ali on the Western world, and the West's suspicious silence and complicity with regard to his excesses. Ben Ali failed in convincing the West that Ennahda was a terrorist organization because we were successful in defending our movement with evidence that Ennahda is democratic and peaceful political party. We rebutted all the allegations of terrorism against Ennahda made by the Western media by taking legal action, in which we won all of our court cases (more than ten cases against top newspapers in the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Belgium, and Italy). Ben Ali failed to prove and convince others that our Movement was a terrorist one. There was a carpet bombing strategy of fabricated and false information released by the "Tunisian Agency for External Communication" to foreign media and Western intelligence agencies for the purpose of distorting our image and implicating us in terrorism. But we managed to defend ourselves in Western courts, and we refuted all of these false and malicious allegations because, in fact, we were not a terrorist organization. As Ennahda, we did not have an armed wing, nor had we ever gotten involved in any terrorist activity in Tunisia, or abroad. To the contrary: we condemned all terrorist activities against foreign tourists — whether it was in Indonesia or Egypt and the terrorist activities in the United States, United Kingdom, or France. As policy, and in practice, we used to condemn the violence of violent groups.

As Ennahda activists we managed to develop an enlightened Islamic thinking and publicized it in the Western universities through our participation in scientific and academic symposiums and meetings, which confirmed the peaceful nature of Ennahda. Although we were very interested in establishing relations with the West, the West was not interested in establishing political relations with us because Ben Ali's regime rejected our political and institutional status. In general, the West treated us humanely and avoided engaging us in a political dialogue. For example, some leaders of Ennahda resided in France for 30 years but they were not invited, even once, to the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs. As members of an illegal, marginalized, and negatively branded organization, we became a humanitarian case study, the findings of which were published by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. However, we have to acknowledge that we enjoyed protection provided by the state of France. As a member of the United Nations Organization, France is bound by all

international conventions related to refugees. At the same time, we were seen as a security concern because we were under strict and continuous security surveillance. When the West's security agencies became convinced that we were truthful regarding our choices, and were distancing ourselves completely from any terrorism-related activity, we were allowed to move freely. As a result, the Western security agencies stopped dealing with us as a security concern. Personally, I was allowed to travel to USA in 1989 and 1990, and I lectured at 17 American universities. The last time I was invited to visit the United States, and lecture at the University of Tampa (Florida), was in 1993. As such I obtained a visa to enter the United States from the U.S. Consulate in London. The next day I was asked to return to the Consulate to correct a mistake on my visa. To my surprise, the visa was cancelled under Ben Ali's pressure! I was allowed to enter the States again only after the fall of Ben Ali, which ended his pressure. We were knocking on the West's doors for the purpose of recognition, but the West acknowledged our existence only as a humanitarian case. Thanks to the revolution for putting us in power and making the West deal with us as political body. Early in our exilic journey, we were willing to communicate with the West because we believed in diversity in the fields of civilizations, thinking, and politics and we rejected violence as a tool for political activities, but the West by the virtue of its realism preferred to deal with the existing power at that time, although it knew well we had a just cause. At the same time, the West refused to accept Ben Ali's request to put us on the terrorist lists or hand us to him. Therefore, one can say under the revolution's pressure and the new situation that developed as a result of it, we did not go to the West, but the West came to us.

Noureddine Jebnoun: When I arrived at your home, I noticed the presence of security forces around the residence and personal protection inside your home. Is there a credible threat to the life of Sheikh Rachid al-Ghannouchi? Do you have an idea where the threat is coming from?

Sheikh Rachid al-Ghannouchi: It seems so. However, the security apparatus is the entity that assesses the seriousness of the threat; and based on that, the security apparatus decides which action should be taken. The party posing the threat is not specified. Some *Takfiri* groups could be a source of threat, but the source of this threat is unclear and unspecified. In the assessment of the security agencies, there is a threat. It may be the result of eavesdropping on the actors posing the threat. As it can be seen, the security has been reinforced recently. Definitely, the actors who abhor the revolution, and who do not want democratic choice in Tunisia to succeed, are behind the threat.

Noureddine Jebnoun: Are these actors internal, external, regional, or international? Is there a connection or engagement among these actors?

Sheikh Rachid al-Ghannouchi: I fully believe that all these actors are connected. I believe that all those who have an interest in defusing the remaining light in the "Arab Spring" are trying to confuse the Tunisian political scene. Moreover, they know

the assassination of a political leader led to the fall of the first Ennahda government; and the assassination of a second political leader led to the fall of the second Ennahda government. Assassination is a known tactic in creating chaos and confusion. Therefore, the culprits are those who have an interest in preventing the Tunisian train from resuming its journey to deliver the first Arab democracy.

Noureddine Jebnoun: Do you think that Tunisia can be a model for the Arab Middle East?

Sheikh Rachid al-Ghannouchi: I am very convinced it can. Despite the fact that the Tunisian society has its specificities, I certainly believe that Tunisia can be a democratic role model for the Arab world. Tunisia has what any other Arab country lacks, such as a moderate Tunisian temperament, like the moderate climate of Tunisia, and the harmony of its population. The population's demographic structure is not broken down or exhausted as a result of ethnic or sectarian division. There are some acute ideological differences, but they do not go so far as to sever relations or bring about civil war. Democracy needs a common ground. Although this common ground, which paves the way for democracy, does not exist in some Arab countries, the common 'Arab dimension' that links them can be the common ground—considering that this Arab dimension did contribute to transferring the revolution quickly from Tunisia to the other Arab countries. Indeed, this shared Arab dimension does not exist outside the Arab region. Thus, the revolution was not imported from outside its Arab environment, even if it succeeded to inspire many social protest movements outside the Arab world.



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