

AI-Monitor Questions
Responses by Dr. Rafik Abdessalem,
Head of External Relations for Ennahdha and former Minister of Foreign Affairs for Tunisia

- 1) What is the purpose of Ennahdha's PR/lobbying push in the US? Is it mainly to present the party as a moderate Islamist alternative, or to make the case that Tunisia needs all the help it can get if the revolution has a chance of surviving?**

Tunisia is presently the only country in the region that has successfully transitioned to democracy since the 2011 Arab Awakenings. In 2014, we marked our second free and fair election, affirming the country's commitment to consensual democracy. As a movement that for decades has advocated for the values and freedoms that democracy represents, Ennahdha deeply cherishes and celebrates this transition.

But we also recognize that Tunisia's nascent democracy remains vulnerable, as evidenced by the recent terrorist attacks at the Bardo Museum and in Sousse. Ennahdha's efforts are aimed at presenting Tunisia's model of consensus, progressive Constitution and inclusive system, and at generating support from the international community to ensure Tunisia's democracy remains strong.

- 2) Do you feel like Ennahdha is de facto lobbying for Tunis? Do you think the government should step up with its lobbying effort? Or do you think Ennahdha has the connections to be successful in this endeavor while Tunis has more pressing concerns right now?**

The Tunisian government – which includes Ennahdha – has been working hard to improve international collaboration on counter-terrorism, generate inward investment and support civil society development. We are grateful of the efforts to support Tunisia's democracy thus far and we remain hopeful that the west will continue to reinforce that support in the years to come.

- 3) Is the party pursuing similar campaigns in other key countries, notably Paris? Cairo? The Gulf?**

Ennahdha is working to generate support for Tunisia's democratic transition and future stability and prosperity across a small number of European markets.

- 4) Jobs are of course a top concern for Tunisia, and one of your members is now minister of employment; what is the party telling the West about what is needed on that front? Is the US being receptive?**

Creating the right environment for economic growth and improving job prospects for Tunisians is a top priority for the government and for the Ministry for the Employment and Training. There is a significant gap between the needs of the labor market and the available skills. This is due to the nonalignment of university education with the needs of companies. To address this problem, the Ministry is designing a new reform program that will improve employability of graduates through additional training and reconnect the unemployed (particularly the long-term unemployed) with peers and enterprises.

The Ministry is also launching an entrepreneurship program that facilitates creating companies in close cooperation with financial institutions for more flexible funding, that builds an ecosystem to encourage entrepreneurial activity and facilitates mentorship, and that stimulate entrepreneurial spirit among younger generation. We are looking to work closely with international markets like the U.S. that have implemented effective entrepreneurship policies to better our own programs.

We are also looking at vocational training closely, which is yet to become an alternative of choice for Tunisian youth – only 8% of young people in Tunisia are in vocational training. The Ministry launched a reform program that establishes qualifying training courses for careers in vocational training, anchors the training centres to the local economic and social environment and also improves the image of vocation training among youth.

To continue to make this progress, Tunisia needs greater international economic support in all of these areas. Increased trade and investment from the U.S. and other western markets will create jobs for educated, unemployed youth, providing a sense of purpose and offering them an alternative to the financial appeal of joining extremist groups.

5) With regard to Ennahda’s philosophy, why do you think it’s important to reassure the US and the West about its democratic bona fides? Are you worried that the West could withhold aid to Tunisia if it doesn’t trust a key partner in the government? Or are you laying the groundwork for good relations in case the party in the future is once again in charge? Both?

The premise of your question is wrong. International support is critical for any country transitioning from dictatorship to democracy. Tunisia is an inspiration for the Arab world, and as Tunisia’s Islamic democrats, Ennahdha sees Islam and democracy as sharing the same values. Our efforts to communicate with the West are rooted in the need to generate support from the international community to ensure that Tunisia’s democracy remains strong.

6) There is growing concern that Tunisia could revert back to authoritarianism in its fight against terrorism. Is part of Ennahda’s lobbying strategy aimed at defending against a potential crackdown against the party, as happened with the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt?

Ennahdha is working alongside our coalition partners to build a better future for Tunisia, with strong democratic institutions, economic opportunity for all, more effective security and the protection of human rights. Our approach is based upon compromise, inclusiveness and our belief that the values of democracy and Islam are fully compatible.

In 2014, we marked our second free and fair election, affirming the country’s commitment to consensual democracy. There is no going back, in part because the people of Tunisia understand how important it is to protect the balance between security and our civil liberties.

7) The party appears to be protecting itself against its more extreme secularist critics with its western overtures. How does that impact relations with its base in more rural, religiously conservative parts of Tunisia, where disaffected young people may be attracted to Salafists, Jihad,

etc.? How does Ennahda position itself as an attractive alternative to both the West and to more conservative Tunisians? Is that a struggle?

As an Islamic democratic party, Ennahdha and its leaders have worked tirelessly to combat extremism and promote an inclusive society. Our words and actions have shown that democracy and Islam are compatible. We reject extremism and terrorism and have earned the trust of voters because we have fought to protect human rights and liberties, strengthened our civil society institutions and empowered all Tunisians to participate in the process of building an inclusive, democratic Tunisia.

8) Let's talk a bit about the party's stint in government over the past few years. Secularists have accused the party of turning a blind eye to Salafi radicalism, letting young people go to Libya, backing Sharia & blasphemy laws, etc. What is your response? Are there mistakes you acknowledge? Lessons learned?

We are part of a pioneering model of partnership in government between moderate secularists and a moderate Islamic party. The party's track record shows that we have worked hard to prevent the spread of extremism, both in this government and previously. When Ennahdha was part of the Troika government, we:

- Introduced the new security and anti-terrorism laws
- Reasserted state control over 80 percent of the mosques that had become hotbeds of extremism after the revolution
- Re-established local police patrols
- Declared Ansar al-Sharia as a terrorist organization.

Extremists have no place in Tunisian society – that is not just Ennahdha's belief but Tunisia's.

9) Are some of the debates cited above now settled within the party, with the more conservative wing definitely beaten on issues such as sharia and blasphemy? Or do you expect these debates on contentious social issues to continue for quite some time? What about the decision to compromise with the opposing parties and step down; is Ennahda split at all on that decision?

First, dialogue and debate about matters of importance are signs of a healthy democracy. Ennahdha has always been clear that it believes in and will defend human rights, including the rights of women, freedom of conscience, democracy and inclusiveness.

Ennahdha's belief in democracy and human rights dates back to our beginnings in the early 80's and is proven by our writings and literature. In fact, we demonstrated our commitment to a civil state in 2005 when, together with secular opposition parties in the "18 October Collective," we drafted a reform program declaring that "a civil state built on republican doctrines and human rights" as the only acceptable basis for a new Tunisia.

In accordance with Ennahdha's concept of a democratic political system, Tunisia's new Constitution — which Ennahdha played a major part in producing, which was adopted by over 94% of parliament and which was praised by all leading democracies — enshrines Tunisia as a "civil state, based on the principle of citizenship, the will of its people, and the supremacy of the law" and cannot be modified in any future revisions of the constitution.

Therefore the issue of ideology you refer to was put to rest by the consensus built around the constitution which provides a framework for a democratic state and society. Ennahdha believes that a Muslim democracy is as much possible as democracies in majority Christian, Hindu, or Jewish countries.

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