



REPORT ARAB POLITICS BEYOND THE UPRISINGS

Tunisia's Unwritten Story

The Complicated Lessons of a Peaceful Transition

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Pundits and analysts have celebrated Tunisia's post-revolution transition as a paradigm for peaceful change. Alone among the Arab countries that rose up in 2011, Tunisia successfully adopted a new political system while maintaining relative stability. The popular story of this transition features high-minded secularist heroes who saved the revolution from the hands of bumbling Islamists. But this narrative is deeply flawed. A close look at the 2013 National Dialogue negotiations reveals a more complicated history. In reality, the country averted disaster because powerful players—including the trade union, Islamists, and remnants of the old regime—pursued self-interest in a uniquely Tunisian context that ultimately facilitated compromise. The result has been imperfect: old-regime reactionaries fared far better than is commonly understood, and socioeconomic gains remain elusive. Thus, rather than providing an easily exportable model, Tunisia's National Dialogue carries more complex lessons for other transitions, both within the Arab world and beyond.

The crowning global recognition for Tunisia's fraught but still-floating post-revolutionary political transition came on October 9, 2015. On that day, Tunisia's National Dialogue Quartet—a group of four civil society organizations that negotiated the country through a political crisis in 2013—learned they had won the Nobel Peace Prize.

The announcement came as a much-needed breath of fresh air at a time when hope generated by the 2011 Arab uprisings had been all but extinguished. Egypt's revolution had reversed, giving way to a dictatorship more brutal than before. Libya's transition had unraveled, producing two rival governments and a nearly failed state. Islamic State jihadists, who held territory in Syria and Iraq, had recruited from and conducted terrorist attacks in countries across the region, including Tunisia. And Syria's hemorrhaging of civilian casualties and refugees continued unabated in what had become the worst humanitarian crisis since World War II. Tunisia—the country where a fruit seller's suicide had, less than five years earlier, sparked the Arab uprisings—remained the sole success story of those uprisings, managing to avoid the chaos, authoritarian reversal, and state collapse that had befallen its neighbors.

This was thanks in part to its favorable starting conditions. Tunisia was a comparatively well-educated middle-income country with a strong state, no history of military interventionism, and no major sectarian or ethnic divides. Even before the Arab uprisings, Tunisia's favorable conditions for democratization had prompted some scholars to refer to the "Tunisian paradox." It was a country with strong democratizing potential that was nevertheless a brutal police state under the thumb of a

kleptocratic strongman, the autocrat Zine El Abidine Ben Ali (president from 1987 until his overthrow in January 2011). With the revolution, the paradox seemed finally to have been resolved: Tunisia had proved it indeed had the qualities necessary for success.

But the survival until now of Tunisia's transition was also a result of political processes that can't be explained away with such deterministic generalizations about economic development and education levels. Its political elites steered the country back from the brink of catastrophe in Summer 2013, when a political crisis largely of their own making threatened to derail the transition. The Quartet, along with prominent Islamist and old-regime-linked politicians, played a vital role in saving Tunisia's transition that year with an experiment in negotiated crisis management known as the National Dialogue. It was the success of the National Dialogue that prompted the Nobel Committee to award the Quartet the Peace Prize.



PRO-REVOLUTION GRAFFITI IN SIDI BOUZID, TUNISIA, 2011. PHOTO CREDIT MONICA MARKS.

Bogus Narratives, Fuzzy Lessons

In the Quartet's Nobel victory, supportive Western onlookers saw a chance to congratulate Tunisians on a transition well-done and to hold up their example as an inspiring model for other Arab countries.

Tunisia's transition, however, remained rife with challenges, and the Quartet's role poorly understood.¹

Despite its importance in an especially dangerous chapter of Tunisia's post-revolutionary transition, few regional experts understood the drivers behind the Quartet's formation or the key interests of its members. In Western capitals that took an interest in Tunisia, such as Brussels, Paris, London, and Washington, the Quartet was widely perceived as an apolitical group of secular civil society actors who had tenaciously forced elected but untrustworthy Islamists to step down from power. The group's Nobel Prize therefore represented a triumph not only for Tunisia's democratic transition, but also for the supposedly secular character of its society. In the eyes of many Western analysts who played a key role in shaping these views, these goals were linked, if not inseparable. Many of these observers had not properly field-tested their assumptions, instead relying on infrequent visits to Tunisia or occasional meetings with prominent Tunisians in Western capitals, where self-justifying accounts from leading Quartet activists often supported their assumptions.²

In this way, a beguiling and enduring narrative was born. Inchoate and instinctual, based more on analysts' assumptions than on careful rendering of facts on the ground, it became the standard reading of a story not yet written. It cast the Quartet members—especially the Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT), Tunisia's powerful trade union and the Dialogue's undisputed standard-bearer—as righteous mediators standing midway between Tunisia's seemingly familiar secular actors and its devil-we-know Islamist political elites. Manifestly political, the Quartet nevertheless appeared in English- and French-language press, and in many analysts' accounts, as unblemished civil society saviors. And that was before they won the Nobel Prize.



REPRESENTATIVES OF THE TUNISIAN NATIONAL DIALOGUE QUARTET AT THE OSCE IN VIENNA IN FEBRUARY 2016, L-R: HOUCINE ABBASSI, SECRETARY GENERAL OF THE TUNISIAN GENERAL LABOUR UNION (UGTT), OUIDED BOUCHAMAOU, PRESIDENT OF THE TUNISIAN CONFEDERATION OF INDUSTRY, ABDESSATTAR BEN MOUSSA, PRESIDENT OF THE TUNISIAN HUMAN RIGHTS LEAGUE, AND NOUREDDHINE ALLEGUE, PRESIDENT OF THE TUNISIAN ORDER OF LAWYERS. CREDIT WIKIMEDIA COMMONS/MAHMOUD.

The story held that a group of civil society “outsiders,” in cooperation with allegedly apolitical technocrats, rescued elected government from incompetent Islamists. More informed but still simplistic versions of the story portrayed the Quartet as apolitical mediators equally opposed to both political Islamists and counter-revolutionary old regime elites. In both these narratives, the heroic Quartet peacefully prodded Tunisia’s Islamists out of power without eroding the country’s nascent democratic institutions. Tunisia thereby avoided collapsing into chaos, like Libya, or crude coup making, like Egypt. Told this way, the lessons of Tunisia’s National Dialogue shone in bold, broad brushstrokes: soft power prevailed.

The trouble is, that’s not quite what happened. The 2013 National Dialogue, rather than offering an easily exportable model of how to rescue transitions in danger, had complex origins and destinations rooted in Tunisia’s history, its revolution, and its political and institutional relationships. Rather than being framed as a transcendent civil society mediation overcoming a secular/Islamist binary, the National Dialogue should be read as having occupied one pivotal moment in a three-way struggle for power between Tunisia’s secular left (embodied by the UGTT), its Islamist center-right (embodied by the Ennahda political party), and a range of political figures and economic elites connected to the old

regime. This last group was represented to an important degree by the employers' association (the Tunisian Confederation of Industry, Trade, and Handicrafts, known by its French acronym, UTICA) and elements of Tunisia's now-ruling party, Nidaa Tounes.

This three-way struggle—possible only after the reemergence of the long-suppressed Ennahda party following Ben Ali's ouster—produced in post-revolutionary Tunisia a counterbalancing effect capable of checking excesses of power. Any two actors could offset gains or threats posed by the third. But it also produced a pattern of self-interested positioning in which these groups' political goals have subsumed the pursuit of core revolutionary goals, such as institutional reform and transitional justice.

Though the Quartet certainly deserves praise for its role in resolving the 2013 political crisis, Western reactions to its Nobel generally glossed over these details, revealing a troubling lack of knowledge about the dips and twists of Tunisia's transition. Popular narratives captured basic contours of crisis and resolution, but omitted the context that explained those events. As a result, the story of 2013's political crisis, and the National Dialogue that resolved it, was reduced to a simple case of democracy saved.

In stripping reality of its messy complexities, such shorthand retellings continue to replace more granular understandings of the National Dialogue, more than a year after the Quartet's Nobel victory. Ill-informed narratives have prevented a key chapter of Tunisia's transition from being understood historically on its own terms. Responses to the case of the Quartet's Nobel Prize victory have therefore distilled two wider but linked problems: a tendency to rely heavily on minimalistic, often misleading accounts of events in Tunisia's transition, and an impulse to apply fuzzily understood lessons from Tunisia to other places. This necessarily renders it difficult—if not impossible—to suss out the real lessons from Tunisia's experience that might translate to other transitions in the Arab world and beyond.

Ultimately, the Quartet's Nobel Prize victory, rather than bookending a successfully completed transition, underscored the precious fragility of Tunisia's transitional process, which hinged on recalibrations of power between a triangle of competing political nodes. The 2013 National Dialogue process presents an excellent case study for understanding how this locally specific triangle of actors contested their interests. These actors did ultimately resolve the crisis—but it is crucial to understand that it was a crisis of their own making.

Broadening the lessons of Tunisia's experience to other countries, however, requires a bit more delicacy. First, one must understand the events as they unfolded. The following sections home in on Tunisia's 2013 National Dialogue process as an example of a critical but grossly misunderstood juncture in

Tunisia's transition. I then discuss how those self-interested motives interlinked to produce the political crisis of summer 2013, and how the Dialogue resolved that crisis. Finally, I examine what lessons, if any, the experience bears for other countries that are struggling to emerge from authoritarian rule and its aftermath.

An Energized Union Seeks a Larger Role

The Dialogue's initiator and leader was Tunisia's general trade union, the UGTT—a group whose secular unionist values represent many Tunisians, especially those on the left. The UGTT sees its role in society differently than most other trade unions. From its founding in 1946, the UGTT's leaders have seen it as responsible for a special, dual mission: defending the rights of workers, but also—and perhaps more importantly—guaranteeing Tunisia stays on a sovereign, “modern” path.

The organization's history informs its self-understanding: the UGTT coordinated resistance against the French during Tunisia's fight for independence. In the early 1950s, when French authorities arrested Tunisia's nationalist leadership—including its future first president, Habib Bourguiba—the young union, led by its now-iconic founder, Farhat Hached, stepped in to steer the revolutionary cause. Because of its leading role in Tunisia's anticolonial struggle, the UGTT is imbued with a huge amount of historical and popular legitimacy. It has also traditionally seen itself as a kind of nationalist lodestar, a popularly legitimate force that can and should keep Tunisia on a sovereign, secular path. Boasting 750,000 members in a population of just under eleven million, it also holds a powerful political bargaining chip: by calling a general strike, the UGTT can grind the economy to a standstill. It is difficult to overstate how unique a role the UGTT has played in Tunisian society and politics. No other trade union in the Middle East and North Africa region has wielded a comparable level of economic or political influence, and no other trade union can lay claim to such a central role in the anticolonial independence struggle.

Despite its legacy and large membership, the UGTT's leadership was heavily co-opted under Tunisia's first two presidents, Bourguiba and Ben Ali. Ben Ali took co-optation to a new level, buying off the UGTT's top brass with free cars, special access to loans and guarantees of legal immunity should they face accusations of wrongdoing. The famous Gafsa mining basin protests of 2008—which scholars argue presaged and potentially jump-started Tunisia's revolution—began as a local union action against the UGTT's corrupt national leadership.³ The revolutionary protests of late 2010 and early 2011 reflected this split between the UGTT's corrupt national leadership and its respected, relatively independent role

at the local level. Revolutionary protests started from local UGTT headquarters, but some protesters carried signs indicting union bosses' corruption with messages like "RCD, UGTT: corrupt traitors"—a reference to Ben Ali's old party, the Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD).⁴

After Ben Ali's departure, the UGTT was eager to reestablish its credibility and reassert political influence. At its December 2011 conference, the UGTT ousted its corrupt general secretary, Abdessalam Jrad, and other Ben Ali-era leaders. A reenergized union sought to assert itself as an independent force—one that could powerfully oppose, partner with, or even supervise the role of government.

This new mission created tension between the UGTT and the post-revolutionary Troika government. The Troika, a coalition of three parties, came to power through Tunisia's first democratic elections in October 2011 and was led by Ennahda, a center-right Islamist party that had been banned for decades. Though it formed a coalition with two smaller, mostly secular parties (Ettakatol and Congress for the Republic, or CPR) Ennahda's victory stunned many secularists, pro-union leftists, and political and economic elites.

The UGTT's leadership had long viewed Islamists as a broad and blurry group inherently opposed to modern values. Ideological hostilities ran deep. "Since we were young people at university [in the 1970s and 1980s] we've been fighting for different visions of the state," said Mongi Ammami, an adviser to the UGTT's Secretary General. "Our vision is modern, theirs is seventh-century."⁵ Like other UGTT leaders I interviewed who had been imprisoned and tortured alongside Ennahda members under the regimes of Bourguiba and Ben Ali, Ammami (who was imprisoned by the former of the two dictators) tended to consider Islamism the main threat to unionism, rather than old regime authoritarianism. "Bourguiba did what he thought he had to do ... he defended republican values," Ammami told me in 2014. "But Islamists have a totally different project, khilafa [building a caliphate]. It's a fascist discourse."⁶

UGTT leaders also saw Ennahda as a political competitor intent on dismantling unionism. "At the end of the day, Islamists don't believe in syndicalism," said one nationally prominent UGTT leader during an interview in 2012. "They just want solidarity under God."⁷ In the years following Tunisia's revolution, UGTT leaders worried that Ennahda—with the support of supposedly Islamist revolutionary militias, Salafi jihadists, and even some members of its Troika coalition partner CPR—intended to weaken the union by infiltrating it from within and attacking it from without. The UGTT twice held large protests

against Ennahda in 2012; in February, in response to garbage dumped outside union offices, and in December, after police fired birdshot on union-backed demonstrators.⁸ The UGTT's leaders strongly believed Ennahda was behind these abuses.

The UGTT especially decried the role of the Leagues to Protect the Revolution (LPR), a group that UGTT leaders claimed functioned as Ennahda's militia. The LPR were a complex collection of former neighborhood watch committees formed to provide security in the aftermath of Ben Ali's ouster. As police returned to the streets in spring 2011, many committees simply dissolved. Others continued and set up shop in local RCD offices. Some of these acted as grassroots revolutionary pressure groups. Others morphed into thuggish mafia-style units, using RCD archives, which contained a wealth of potentially incriminating information about many Tunisians, as collateral to blackmail townsfolk. With few exceptions, scholars and journalists neglected interviewing the Leagues.⁹ Though there was no evidence to support UGTT leaders' assertion that the Leagues had functioned as Ennahda's shock troops, or its militia, the UGTT's narrative stuck. First Tunisian media and later Nidaa Tounes also helped to spread the story. Western analysts, often sympathetic to the UGTT's secular and pro-labor orientations, would frequently repeat rather than interrogate this narrative.

Ennahda's Growing Mistrust of UGTT

For its part, Ennahda claimed the UGTT was intentionally sabotaging Tunisia's economy to topple the Islamist-led Troika. Ennahda leaders I interviewed throughout 2012 and 2013 described UGTT leaders as leftist provocateurs ideologically prejudiced against Islamists. Many suggested that the UGTT's leaders were intentionally taking a hands-off approach to thousands of wildcat strikes happening throughout the country. Some even claimed that the UGTT, possibly with support from the RCD, was stoking these strikes to make governance an especially impossible job.

Research has suggested that such assertions, like some of the UGTT's claims against Ennahda, are untrue.¹⁰ Yet with the economy in post-revolutionary free fall, Ennahda leaders, thoroughly inexperienced in governing, tended to approach the UGTT with fear and frustration, unsure how to transform what they perceived as obstructionism into constructive collaboration. One crucial mistake Ennahda leaders made was encouraging their supporters to counter-protest at UGTT demonstrations during 2012. Instead of cooperating to solve Tunisia's socioeconomic challenges, the UGTT and Ennahda spent much of 2012 locked in a destructive cycle of competing street protests that directly contributed to Tunisia's 2013 political crisis.¹¹

Ennahda placed itself in further opposition to the union by allegedly awarding public administration jobs to its own supporters.¹² Ennahda leaders denied wrongdoing, claiming that winning parties in established democracies often exercise their prerogative to make political appointments. Ennahda's spokesperson Zied Ladhari attempted to discredit the source of these accusations,¹³ a man named Abdelkader Labbaoui, president of the Tunisian Union of Public Service and Administrative Neutrality (UTSPNA). Ladhari claimed that Labbaoui was a member of Nidaa Tounes's executive board. Labbaoui fiercely denied these claims and on November 26, 2013 Nidaa Tounes released a statement asserting that Labbaoui did not sit, and had never sat, on its executive board.¹⁴ While critics of Ennahda viewed its alleged administrative stacking as an incontrovertible fact, Ennahda members described these accusations as an unfair but predictable backlash against Ennahda from old-regime-linked elites—whom they described as an entitled class that felt shocked and outraged at Ennahda's victory in Tunisia's 2011 elections.

Aside from UTSPNA's general estimates, little data or qualitative research studies exist that support the claim that Ennahda massively stacked administrative posts, placing incompetent loyalists where skilled technocrats should have been. More research is needed to prove or disprove these claims. Yet there are at least three reasons why Ennahda might have perceived the practice of stacking as conferring certain strategic benefits. The party may have intended the granting of public administrative posts as a kind of ad hoc transitional justice, rewarding its followers for their support during years of persecution. It may also have seen stacking as a step toward creating a usable bureaucracy at a post-revolutionary moment when it perceived Tunisia's administrations as hostile toward Islamists, and rigidly authoritarian in their history and mindset. Finally, Ennahda may have understood stacking as providing a kind of insurance policy should Tunisia's political winds blow in more counter-revolutionary or anti-Islamist directions.

Whatever the rationale, the perception that Ennahda stacked administrative posts brought the party into heightened conflict with the UGTT, which condemned it for threatening the public administration's neutrality. Some prominent members of the UGTT, along with anti-Islamist parties like Nidaa Tounes and the Popular Front, went further, claiming Ennahda was covertly seeking to Islamize the Tunisian state.

UGTT Starts the First National Dialogue to Pressure Ennahda

Escalating tensions between Ennahda and the UGTT played a central role in precipitating the 2013 National Dialogue—a project that began fully one year earlier than most observers realize. The UGTT began what they labeled a “National Dialogue” in June 2012 in an explicit attempt to apply pressure on Ennahda, a party UGTT leaders perceived as jeopardizing both the union’s national influence and the “civic” (i.e. secular) character of the state. The summer 2012 National Dialogue formed the basis of the 2013 National Dialogue itself, for which the UGTT and its fellow Quartet mediators won the Nobel Peace Prize.

In the months prior to June 2012, Ennahda—freshly installed in the Constituent Assembly—had engaged in protracted debates over whether or not the word “sharia” should appear in Tunisia’s new constitution.¹⁵ These conversations generated identity-based controversy and engendered fears among secular and leftist Tunisians that Ennahda would railroad their views, imposing a majoritarian conservatism on the country.¹⁶ The UGTT’s first attempt to call a National Dialogue in summer 2012 was therefore motivated in part by a feeling that the union had a historical obligation to intervene in the protection of secular ideals. Its intervention found strong support among well-established secular civil society organizations that shared its suspicions regarding Ennahda. Two of these, the League of Human Rights and the Bar Association, helped the UGTT convene the 2012 Dialogue. UTICA joined the following year, rounding out what became the 2013 National Dialogue Quartet, which won the Nobel in 2015.

But in the summer of 2012, the National Dialogue initiative faced strong pushback from Ennahda and its coalition partner, CPR, a stubbornly revolutionary human rights-oriented party. Together, Ennahda and CPR believed the Dialogue was an attempt by unelected actors to dictate the democratic political process. They were especially disturbed by the Dialogue’s inclusion of Nidaa Tounes, an unelected party heavily driven by ex-RCD money and manpower, which included in its executive bureau a number of leading UGTT figures who shared Nidaa’s strong anti-Islamist stance. Ennahda and CPR leadership thus felt that the 2012 Dialogue wasn’t a neutral, civil society process, but that it was something much worse: a vehicle for the old regime to exert unelected control on Tunisia’s freshly elected government and legislature.¹⁷

Seeds of a Crisis

Ennahda and CPR's position, however, grew less tenable after a series of destabilizing events, including the September 2012 attack on the U.S. Embassy in Tunis and two high-profile political assassinations in 2013.

The first assassination, on February 6, 2013, targeted leftist politician Chokri Belaid, a vocal critic of Ennahda and long-time defender of trade unionists. Though Islamic State militants eventually claimed responsibility, many secular and leftist Tunisians believed Belaid's assassination proved what they had always suspected: that Ennahda's supposedly "moderate" Islamism masked support for violent jihadist extremism. Since Ennahda's re-entry to Tunisian politics in 2011, they had consistently asserted that Ennahda was using democracy as a tool to establish authoritarian theocracy.¹⁸ Many of these leftists and secularists saw the rise of more visible Salafi tendencies (both violent and nonviolent) in Tunisia immediately following the revolution as reflections of "Islamism" writ large—a movement they felt Ennahda was leading. They made few distinctions between Ennahda's brand of center-right politically participatory Islamism and violent jihadism. The Belaid assassination, therefore, merely confirmed their assumptions. After Belaid's death, thousands massed to accompany his coffin to the Djellaz Cemetery in Tunis, and the UGTT declared a general strike.¹⁹



AFTER THE ASSASSINATION OF CHOKRI BELAID, A VOCAL CRITIC OF ENNAHDA AND LONG-TIME DEFENDER OF TRADE UNIONISTS, THOUSANDS OF HIS SUPPORTERS MASSED TO ACCOMPANY HIS COFFIN TO THE DJELLAZ CEMETARY IN TUNIS. CREDIT: FLICKR/AMINE GHRABI.

The second assassination, on July 25, 2013, was of a lesser-known Arab nationalist member of parliament, Mohamed Brahmi. This killing ground Tunisia's already dragging transition to a standstill.²⁰ It also set the stage for a dramatic three-way power struggle pitting Nidaa, sometimes in criticism of but often in agreement with the UGTT, against Ennahda. This power struggle birthed the political crisis of summer 2013. Sometimes referred to as the Bardo Crisis (named for the Bardo neighborhood of Tunis in which protesters massed before the Tunisian parliament) it was this upheaval that seriously threatened to topple Tunisia's transition. The Bardo Crisis was not inevitable, but was to a large extent manufactured, inflamed, and exploited by the opportunism and self-interested positioning of competing political elites, including the UGTT.

Old Elites and the Crisis at Bardo

Nidaa, an anti-Islamist party founded in June 2012, was especially well poised to exploit political tensions that, though brewing in 2012, boiled over following the two assassinations. The party was founded by Beji Caid Essebsi, its charismatic, octogenarian founder, who has strong ties to the former regimes. While Tunisia's two best-organized political forces, the UGTT and Ennahda, contributed to the development of these tensions, it was Nidaa that capitalized on them the most.

Though Nidaa enjoyed the support of many Tunisian secularists, leftists and trade unionists, its political machine was, as we have seen, fueled at its core by ex-RCD money and manpower. Members of UTICA, which joined the UGTT-led Quartet in August 2013, represented Tunisia's traditional economic elite, and many had a heavily vested interest in maintaining the status quo ante. Together, these groups represented large segments of Tunisia's old political and economic elite—an elite that felt cheated by the victory of three largely nonestablishment parties in 2011.

For months prior to Brahmi's assassination, Nidaa's leadership had been calling for not just the resignation of the government but also the dissolution of Tunisia's core transitional body: the elected National Constituent Assembly. Essebsi appeared on Tunisian television on February 7, 2013—one day after Belaid's assassination—to demand the Assembly's resignation.²¹ Essebsi and other opponents of Ennahda claimed that replacing the elected Constituent Assembly with an unelected group of supposedly apolitical "technocrats" was necessary because the Assembly had overstayed its mandate

and was therefore illegitimate. (Incidentally, the Assembly's one-year mandate, which international experts labeled unrealistically short, was created by Tunisia's 2011 transitional government, which Essebsi headed.)

In demanding swift closure of the Constituent Assembly, Nidaa enjoyed the support of its broad anti-Islamist coalition, which included many Tunisian secularists, leftists and trade unionists. Prominent members of the UGTT sat on its executive and political bureaus, and supported Essebsi's push to dissolve the Assembly. Nidaa's demands were also strongly supported by the Popular Front, a coalition of leftist-communist and Arab nationalist parties in which both Belaid and Brahmi had been members. The Popular Front, which also had strong ties to the UGTT, was close to Nidaa Tounes in 2012 and 2013. It held Ennahda responsible for the assassinations, along with former president Moncef Marzouki, a member of CPR. The Popular Front also forcefully supported Nidaa's push to shutter the Assembly.

Despite the importance of support from leftists and some trade unionist quarters, the primary push to shut the Constituent Assembly came from elites within Nidaa Tounes itself—elites often linked to the former regimes of Bourguiba and Ben Ali by profits made and political careers built. Many felt entitled to rule, and were hungry for a chance to take back power.

The July 3, 2013 coup against Egyptian president Mohamed Morsi, a Muslim Brotherhood member, had injected Ennahda's critics with a boost of confidence. Essebsi, who dubbed the coup Egypt's "second revolution," was especially energized. Following the coup, he and other opponents of the Troika government redoubled their calls for Ennahda and its coalition partners to swiftly cede power to an unelected group of supposedly apolitical technocrats.²²

It was Brahmi's assassination some three weeks later, on July 25, however, that really inflamed public anger. Boosted by opportunistic calls from Essebsi and other political elites, the assassination begat a summer of massive protests and counter-protests that almost succeeded not only in toppling the Ennahda government but also in putting a stop to the transition itself. For weeks in August, anti-Ennahda protesters who supported Essebsi's demands to dissolve the Constituent Assembly met nightly in Bardo Square, just outside the Assembly building, chanting for the government to resign.

Ennahda balked, unwilling to cede its democratically attained power to a nebulous group of Nidaa-friendly technocrats who it feared might reverse Tunisia's democratic transition and possibly reintroduce a Ben Ali-style crackdown that primarily targeted Islamists. Old elites leading Nidaa's attempt at ousting the Constituent Assembly, for their part, claimed that the large numbers of protesters in Bardo Square—

who were opposed to Ennahda and broadly supportive of Nidaa—granted them a sort of supra-electoral “street legitimacy” (shar’aiya al-shary’a) that validated a restoration of their power. The competition quickly moved onto nonelectoral turf, with both Ennahda and Nidaa vying to see which party could gather larger groups. The Bardo Crisis drew the entire transition to a halt and threatened to reverse it completely—ousting not only Tunisia’s first democratically elected legislative and governmental bodies, but also scrapping its nearly completed constitution and nascent democratic institutions before they had a chance to take root.

The 2013 National Dialogue Quartet Emerges

Against protesters’ demands, the UGTT cast itself as a neutral mediator between Nidaa and Ennahda, determined to negotiate a peaceful solution to the Bardo standoff. In August 2013, the UGTT made the surprising decision to invite UTICA, a group whose lobbying on behalf of Tunisia’s ownership class had traditionally placed it at loggerheads with the labor union, to form a three-plus-one mediation Quartet leading the Dialogue. Flanked by two of Tunisia’s most formidable power centers—the labor union and the employers’ association—the Quartet became impossible to ignore.

In September 2013, the Quartet presented Ennahda and Nidaa with a roadmap to resolve their differences. The roadmap rested on a two-way compromise: Ennahda and its Troika partners would leave government completely within the space of just three weeks, while the Constituent Assembly would stay on to complete the constitution and pave the way for Tunisia’s 2014 elections.²³

The UGTT and UTICA, the Quartet’s other heavyweight, were not neutral actors. Both overlapped politically and ideologically with Nidaa, and both shared Nidaa’s goal of booting Ennahda from power. Yet crucially, under the UGTT’s leadership, the Quartet opposed Nidaa’s demand of dissolving the Constituent Assembly. Had it decided otherwise, Tunisia’s transition would likely be in tatters.

The 2013 political crisis presented the UGTT with an important opportunity to regain status as a national savior, recouping lost credibility after decades of regime persecution and manipulation. The UGTT burnished its reputation both locally and internationally through its successful mediation efforts. The Bardo Crisis also presented the UGTT with a platform on which to display its political and ideological weight. Indeed, though Ennahda ultimately succeeded in negotiating the terms of its exit, the UGTT’s chief negotiator Houcine Abassi did not shy from using union power to cajole desired concessions.²⁴

Ultimately, the National Dialogue managed to quell the highly politicized three-way struggle that produced Tunisia's 2013 political standoff. The Quartet resolved this impasse without dissolving the Constituent Assembly—a critical decision that helped keep Tunisia's transition afloat. The National Dialogue also forged a fragile consensus among Tunisia's major power players: the UGTT, Ennahda, and Tunisia's traditional political and economic elites, represented jointly by Nidaa and the Employers' Association. Throughout the 2013 Dialogue and the crisis that catalyzed it, each of these groups asserted themselves as powerful forces on Tunisia's post-revolutionary stage, demanding to be integrated—or, in the case of the old elites, reintegrated—into Tunisian politics.

Each point in Tunisia's post-revolutionary power triangle—the trade unionists, the center-right Islamists, and the old regime-linked incumbents—represented a constituency that wanted to secure increased influence on Tunisia's shifting political stage. Trade unionists affiliated with the UGTT counted on their leaders to realize Tunisians' revolutionary demands for economic dignity. Their leaders supported these demands, but also sought to restore the trade union's autonomy and political clout after decades of co-optation at the hands of Ben Ali.

Nidaa and UTICA spoke for Tunisia's traditional political and economic elites—a class that, as we have noted, felt disenfranchised and directly threatened by the results of Tunisia's first democratic nationwide elections in 2011. These incumbents sought a return to portions of the prerevolutionary status quo that preserved their social and economic advantages. They aspired to return Tunisia to the model of autocracy represented by Bourguiba's presidency, which they viewed as classier and less thuggish than Ben Ali's, while still preserving a beneficial ordering of the same oligarchs.

Lastly, Ennahda's leaders spoke for a more conservative, traditionally marginalized lower middle class that played second fiddle, both politically and economically, to the secularized upper middle class that Nidaa represented. Ennahda's constituents, excluded from participation in Tunisian politics for decades under both Bourguiba and Ben Ali, suffered political imprisonment, rape, widespread torture, blacklisting from employment and educational opportunities, and other human rights abuses during the 1990s and the first decade of the twenty-first century. For Ennahda's leaders and supporters, the revolution opened an unprecedented opportunity to secure a seat at Tunisia's political table. Ennahda's constituency therefore saw this post-revolutionary power jockeying as a matter of existential importance. Democracy, they had come to believe, was in their own self-interest.

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But even as Ennahda made great gains through democratic elections, they feared that old regime incumbents and ideologically opposed leftist unionists would seize any chance to snatch those gains away. The 2013 political crisis and National Dialogue therefore represented a tricky balancing act for Ennahda. But the party's leaders were savvy enough to pursue hard-nosed yet flexibly minimalist positions, opening space for a negotiated settlement. This prevented Tunisia's transition from unraveling in a scenario like Egypt's, and helped maintain the democratic character of Tunisia's transition—something that Ennahda felt served its present and future political self-interest.²⁵

The Importance of Reading Forward: Drawing Lessons from the Dialogue

The lessons of Tunisia's 2013 National Dialogue, like the lessons of its transition as a whole up to this point, are subtler and more contextually specific than popularly acknowledged. International attention, by turning to Tunisia only long enough to register the faint contours of major events like the Quartet's Nobel win or the terrorist attacks of summer 2015, has neglected the full story. Understanding the historicized arc of events is a crucial first step in formulating take-away lessons of Tunisia's transition.

The case of the 2013 National Dialogue process emphasizes the crucial importance of reading key chapters in transitional outcomes not backward, according to the poorly informed narratives of faraway analysts, but starting from the beginning, according to a historically informed consideration of events as they unfolded, and as they were lived by the participants in those events. Reading transitional processes and outcomes in this way reveals the complexities of events: the contingency and reversibility of near-misses, where different outcomes could have been achieved; the competing and sometimes counterintuitive motivations of powerful actors; and the extent to which facts on the ground

confirm or contest popular narratives of events.

A Unique Counterbalance

Even at the most propitious periods in their failed uprisings, Egypt, Libya, Syria, Yemen, and Bahrain lacked the institutions, political capacity and structural factors that enabled Tunisia's transition away from outright dictatorship. In Tunisia, a unique triangle of key power players has, throughout the post-revolutionary period so far, managed to negotiate through its differences in a manner that keeps Tunisia's transition afloat.

These negotiations transpired between a delicately counterbalanced set of actors that simply does not exist in any other Arab country. The UGTT, for instance, has no parallel elsewhere in the Arab world, where civil society groups cannot meaningfully contest the power of regime incumbents. In Tunisia, the UGTT has wielded great power as an organization that represents nearly every public-sector worker in the country and can bring the economy to a standstill by calling general strikes.

Likewise, Tunisia's Islamists are without easy analogue elsewhere in the region. Though Morocco's Justice and Development Party likely comes closest, it is kept tightly under the thumb of a savvy monarchy who has curbed powers of parliament through various strategies of co-optation. Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood lacked the foresight and flexibility of Ennahda, and has not, since the coup against Morsi in 2013, demonstrated a desire to learn from the pragmatic minimalism of Ennahda's experience. Ennahda is a party with a large constituency, relatively long history (it was founded in the early 1980s), and strong internal organizational structures that were, perhaps ironically, more democratically representational than most of its secular competitor parties. It possessed the heft, organization, and leadership to serve as a crucial counterweight to old-regime-linked incumbents during the first phase of Tunisia's transition. Its size, organization, and leadership capacity made it another unique actor in Tunisia's transition, one without easy parallel among Islamist or secular parties elsewhere in the region.

Tunisia's transition does tell us much about the country's politics, and offers a fascinating example of a negotiated power transfer—one in which elements of a deposed dictatorship and leaders of long-exiled political movements, across a deep ideological divide, found a way to govern together after a crisis.

Though these negotiations did, crucially, succeed in keeping Tunisia's transition afloat, the entire process underscored the fragility and reversibility of the country's political progress, and distracted principal actors from grappling with core revolutionary demands.

Political gains of the National Dialogue patterned a so-called "consensus-driven" model of engagement between Nidaa and Ennahda, in particular, which scaled up political cooperation in 2015. In the spring of that year, Ennahda joined a unity government with Nidaa—the victor in Tunisia's fall 2014 elections—and two smaller parties. A form of that unity government endured as this chapter went to press. Nidaa needed the support of Ennahda, parliament's largest and best-organized voting bloc, to pass core pieces of legislation and head off socioeconomic unrest in the face of periodic protests. It also found itself under international pressure to take an inclusive approach from Western governments who had, after Ennahda's succession of political compromises and gracious response to its defeat in the 2014 elections, begun to view the party as a more positive force in Tunisia's transition.

Ennahda, for its part, viewed the unity government as a chance to secure its newly won seat at Tunisia's political table and avoid the exclusionary politics of old, in which center-right Ennahda Islamists were sweepingly branded as terrorists and forced into prison and exile. To consolidate and expand its gains, Ennahda strategically rebranded itself as a party of "Muslim democrats," eased membership requirements, and formally separated its political and religious activities in a much-publicized national conference in May 2016. Formally abandoning the Islamist label made it a more viable partner for Nidaa and helped reinforce positive impressions of Ennahda in Western capitals. Beji Caid Essebsi, Nidaa's founder and the current president of Tunisia, even gave the keynote address at Ennahda's historic conference—a landmark signal of Islamist integration and mutual toleration between the leaders of Tunisia's main Islamist party and Essebsi, the scion of its anti-Islamist elite.

Preserving the Transition but Stalling Reform

Nidaa's willingness to offer Ennahda a symbolic if tokenistic seat at the table of government in 2015—and Ennahda leaders' willingness to cooperate in accepting that participation—reflected the extent to which Tunisian Islamists had surpassed their cousin parties in Egypt and elsewhere to achieve political normalization and integration. More importantly, cooperation between Islamists and old-regime-linked elites on the political level helped sustain Tunisia's transition toward more pluralistic and inclusive forms

of governance. However, it bears noting that most Tunisians agreed that those changes had failed to translate beyond the level of elite coalition building. There has been no real progress in battling corruption, reforming inefficient bureaucracy, or stimulating job growth and infrastructure investments.

Thus, despite overcoming a major political hurdle, the National Dialogue did little to concretely advance Tunisia's pursuit of revolutionary goals, including socioeconomic dignity, institutional reform, and transitional justice. Rather than collaborating to address these critical issues, the Dialogue's protagonists spent much of 2012 and 2013 aggravating, exploiting, and eventually resolving a diversionary political crisis. That crisis sapped political and civil society leaders' energies at a critical transitional moment during which far-reaching changes might have been possible.

As a result, while polling has indicated that most Tunisians remain supportive of the revolution and a transition toward democracy, nostalgia for the supposedly more prosperous authoritarian days of yesteryear remains a potent force. While support for democracy as the best system of governance remains hearteningly high in Tunisia, this nostalgia could blunt support for more aggressive reforms.²⁶

In October 2016, Tunisia overcame a major political challenge as organizing by civil society groups and large public protests thwarted a so-called "reconciliation law." This law would have granted amnesty to corrupt businessmen who stole state money during the Ben Ali era. Positive polling for democracy, combined with activism like this, indicates that Tunisians have not, in general, turned their backs on the revolution's aspirations for dignity and justice. Yet frustrations over unmitigated corruption and widespread unemployment run deep. These have periodically bubbled over in major demonstrations, such as a series of unemployment protests that erupted in March 2016 and a spate of public suicides by unemployed youths that took place in October of that year.

With the Nobel Peace Prize, Tunisia's National Dialogue Quartet has been rightly applauded for helping Tunisia overcome a major political crisis. History should record that story in detail, and learn from their efforts. But history should also remember that the Dialogue's principal protagonists resolved a conflict that, to varying degrees, each one helped create, and that political power players were the primary winners in the saga. For average citizens to taste the fruits of Tunisia's revolution, their leaders must transcend the opportunistic infighting that characterized 2012 and 2013 to enact far-reaching economic and institutional reforms. Long after global applause for the Quartet has faded, Tunisians will keep asking what dividends, if any, their revolution has delivered.

Lessons Learned

Tunisia's gradual shifts toward pluralism and more inclusive governance since the toppling of Ben Ali in January 2011 have stemmed from locally contingent factors. These included the advantageous set of starting conditions, which this chapter has described, along with a core group of political parties and civil society organizations. These groups include the UGTT and other groups, like the Tunisian League for Human Rights; secular pro-revolutionary parties like CPR and Ettakatol, Ennahda's Troika coalition partners; and a highly pragmatic Islamist party, Ennahda. Together, these groups were able to counterbalance old-regime-linked incumbents as well as one another's more maximalist demands. The vibrancy and multipolarity of Tunisia's transition is difficult to replicate, but do offer a key takeaway for other transitions: the more centers of competitive power that have built up to oppose a regime, the more difficult it may be for regime-linked incumbents, as well as any other single domineering group, to capture a transition.

Another lesson of Tunisia's National Dialogue, and its transition more broadly, is the importance of learning from one's own history as well as the example of other countries' experiences. Ennahda, for instance, took such a different and more pragmatically influenced approach to power in part because its leaders had seriously reflected on the dangers of maximalism. They bore in mind the lessons of their own experience in Tunisia during 1989, and the experience of Algeria's Islamist party, the Islamic Salvation Front (better known by its French acronym, FIS) from 1990 to 1992. In both instances Islamist gains at the ballot box spooked regimes into initiating a broad-based crackdown on Islamist parties and their members. Internalizing lessons of strategic minimalism gleaned from these experiences, Ennahda's leaders adopted a careful approach oriented toward gradually securing long-term gains. This contrasted sharply with the comparatively inflexible, maximalist approach of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood.²⁷ Following the 2011 revolution, Ennahda's pragmatic flexibility helped it build political influence, contributing to the survival and relative inclusivity of Tunisia's political transition.²⁸

The vibrancy and multipolarity of Tunisia’s transition offer a key takeaway for other transitions: the more centers of competitive power that have built up to oppose a regime, the more difficult it may be for any single domineering group to capture a transition.

Opposition talks that crossed ideology during the first decade of the century—between Ennahda, secular political parties, and some Tunisian human rights groups—also helped build up a pattern of incremental learning, cooperation, and trust-building amongst members of the Tunisian opposition. Together, parties to talks held in Tunisia, Italy, and France throughout the decade signed documents laying out minimum conditions for a Tunisian democracy, should the Ben Ali regime ever fall. In 2005, they even joined together to create a cross-ideological opposition movement, dubbed the October Collective, or October Movement, which brought together leftists, Islamists, human rights groups, and secular parties. The October Collective resulted in the production of more oppositional platform documents, along with a lengthy series of dialogues and letters that debated key oppositional positions and jointly critiqued the Ben Ali regime.

This legacy of learning—a legacy of diverse parts of the opposition joining together to assert shared solidarity against an oppressive regime—proved crucial following Tunisia’s revolution. Instead of descending into pitched infighting, Tunisians of various political and ideological persuasions who supported the revolution managed to work inclusively to lay the building blocks for Tunisia’s transition. The good will built up through these efforts enabled CPR and Ettakatol to accept Ennahda’s invitation, after the Islamist party’s 2011 election win, to join the governing Troika. In contrast, anti-Islamist incumbent elites who had not been part of those trust-building talks denounced Ennahda as terroristic.²⁹

Both Islamists and secularist civil society activists in Tunisia therefore did a great deal of historical learning from their own experiences, and also learned from the failures of would-be revolutionaries and Islamists elsewhere in the Arab world. Failed post-uprising transitions in Egypt, Libya, and Syria were arguably less attuned to history. To be fair, starting conditions, with military powerbrokers, weak states, sectarian cleavages, and regional interference may well have stymied these countries’ attempted transitions even if more learning had taken place. Structures and starting compositions may obstruct

future attempted transitions elsewhere, as well. Crucial factors include domestic hard power arrangements, and whether regional powers and global superpowers interfere in a country's transition. Disadvantageous starting conditions may hinder countries' progress toward democratic transition and consolidation, even if they perfectly follow the lessons of Tunisia's transition, including the importance of dialogue, civil society input, cross-ideological oppositional talks, and historical learning. The case study of Tunisia's transition—specifically the 2013 political crisis and the National Dialogue that resolved it—emphasizes the importance of contextually grounded power struggles in stewarding or stymying democratic transition.

About This Project

This policy report is part of “Arab Politics beyond the Uprisings: Experiments in an Era of Resurgent Authoritarianism,” a multi-year TCF project supported by the Carnegie Corporation of New York. Studies in this series explore attempts to build institutions and ideologies during a period of resurgent authoritarianism, and at times amidst violent conflict and state collapse. The project documents some of the spaces where change is still emerging, as well as the dynamic forces arrayed against it. The collected essays will be published by TCF Press in June 2017.

COVER PHOTO: PROTESTERS OUTSIDE THE HEADQUARTERS OF TUNISIA'S TRADE UNION THE UGTT, MAY 2012. CREDIT FLICKR/AMINE GHRABI.

Notes

1. I initially explored the role of Quartet in my article, “What Did Tunisia's Nobel Laureates Actually Achieve?” *Washington Post*, October 27, 2015. Portions of this report are drawn from that earlier piece.
2. See, for example, Sarah Chayes, “How a Leftist Labor Union Helped Force Tunisia's Political Settlement,” *Carnegie Endowment*, March 27, 2014.
3. See Laryssa Chomiak, “The Making of a Revolution in Tunisia,” *Middle East Law and Governance*, 3(2011):1-2.
4. See Hèla Yousfi, *L'UGTT: Une Passion Tunisienne* (Tunis: IRMC-Cérès Editions, 2015), 100-101.
5. Mongi Ammami, interview with the author, Tunis, August 2014.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Kacem Afaya, interview with the author. Tunis, December 2012.
8. See “À Tunis, des Milliers de Manifestants Réclament le Départ du Gouvernement,” *Le Monde*, February 25, 2012; Hèla

- Yousfi, "Quand l'UGTT Brûle, C'est la Tunisie qui Brûle!" *Nawaat*, February 22, 2012; Thierry Bresillon, "Le Bras de Fer entre Ennahdha et l'UGTT Dégénère Place Mohamed Ali," *Rue89*, December 5, 2012; "Tunisia: Riot Police Fire Birdshot at Protesters," *Human Rights Watch*, December 1, 2015.
9. See Ian Patel and Safa Belghith, "Leagues for the Protection of the Tunisian Revolution," *Open Democracy*, June 25, 2013.
10. Ibid. See also Yousfi, *L'UGTT: Une Passion Tunisienne*, Chapter 5.
11. Amel Boubekour, "The Politics of Protest in Tunisia," German Institute for International and Security Affairs, March 2015.
12. Lilia Weslaty, "Nominations dans le Secteur Public: 87% Pour la Troïka dont 93% en Faveur des Partisans d'Ennahdha," *Nawaat*, March 22, 2013. These figures constitute the principle source of claims that Ennahdha stacked Tunisia's public administration after coming to power in late 2011.
13. Labbaoui voiced these accusations in Tunisian media throughout 2013. See for example Abdelkader Labbaoui: "86% des Nouvelles Nominations Appartiennent à Ennahdha," *Mosaïque FM*, July 7, 2013; "Tunisie: Abdelkader Labbaoui: 90% des Nouveaux Nommés Récemment à l'Administration Appartiennent à Ennahdha," *Tunisie Numérique*, March 20, 2013.
14. According to a Nidaa Tounes communique, November 26, 2013. A copy is in the author's possession.
15. See Monica Marks, "Convince, Coerce, or Compromise? Ennahdha's Approach to Tunisia's Constitution," Brookings Institute, February 10, 2014.
16. Rory McCarthy, "Protecting the Sacred: Tunisia's Islamist Movement Ennahdha and the Challenge of Free Speech," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 42(2015): 4.
17. This insight is based on hundreds of interviews the author conducted with members of Ennahdha and of CPR between 2012 and 2014.
18. See Imen Blioua, "Alleged ISIS Video: Militants Claim Responsibility for Belaid and Brahmi Assassinations," *Tunisia Live*, December 18, 2014.
19. Monica Marks and Kareem Fahim, "Tunisia Moves to Contain Fallout after Opposition Figure Is Assassinated," *New York Times*, February 6, 2013; "Le Principal Syndicat Tunisien Appelle à la Grève Générale Vendredi," *Le Monde*, February 7, 2013.
20. See Monica Marks, "Tunisia in Turmoil," *Foreign Policy*, July 26, 2013. See also Monica Marks, "Tunisia's Transition Continues," *Foreign Policy*, December 16, 2013.
21. See "Béji Caïd Essebsi Revendique la Dissolution de l'ANC," *Business News*, February 7, 2013.
22. For more on the impact of Egypt's 2013 coup on Tunisia, and particularly on Ennahdha, see Monica Marks, "Tunisia," in *Rethinking Political Islam*, ed. Shadi Hamid and William McCants (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming in 2017), chapter 2.
23. "Le Document Officiel de l'Initiative UGTT, UTICA, LTDH et Ordre des Avocats," *Leaders*, September 18, 2013.
24. See Hatem M'rad, *National Dialogue in Tunisia* (Tunis: Tunisian Association of Political Science—ATEP, 2015).
25. See Marks, "Tunisia."
26. See Michael Robbins, "Five Years after the Revolution, More and More Tunisians Support Democracy," *The Washington*

Post, May 20, 2016.

27. For more on the lessons Ennahda learned from their own experience and the experience of Algerian Islamists in the early 1990s versus that of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, see Monica Marks, "Did Egypt's Coup Teach Tunisia's Islamists to Cede Power?" *Project on Middle East Political Science*, June 2011.

28. Ibid. See also Marks, "Tunisia."

29. For more on the cross-oppositional talks and their importance, see Monica Marks, "Purists vs. Pluralists: Cross-Ideological Coalition Building in Tunisia," in *Islam and Democracy in Comparative Perspective*, ed. Alfred Stepan, (New York: Columbia University Press, forthcoming in 2017).



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