

# The Political and Historical Identity of the North African Mediterranean Region

## A Case Study: Tunisia

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Protesters draped in flags rest outside the Tunisian prime minister's office (24 January 2011, Tunis).  
SOURCE: Aljazeera.com.

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## Introduction

FROM ANCIENT times through the periods of the Roman and the Ottoman Empires, to the European colonialism, the politically turbulent Mediterranean region has always been an area where numerous geopolitical influences and interests intertwined. The importance of understanding the historical and political identity of the region can be justified by its impact on the development of the socio-demographic structure and broader contemporary economic/political situation of the European continent. In this context, this article aims to further discuss the historical confrontation of different influences in this area, as well as their impact on the contemporary political development of the Southern Mediterranean region. In order to offer a more detailed and precise approach to this issue, the case of Tunisia was chosen for further investigation. The time period was selected with the aim of understanding the (non)democratic nature of the political system of independent Tunisia

and contemporary Tunisian democracy, formed as, *inter alia*, a result of its previous historical development.

The issue of Tunisia's political identity was largely ignored from the 1970s until the moment of the mass protests against the long-standing Zine El Abidine Ben Ali regime in late 2010, when the so-called *Jasmine Revolution* broke out. Many analyses of the Jasmine Revolution point out the nature and character of hitherto unprecedented popular pressure as a causal factor in the collapse of the unpopular and decrepit Ben Ali regime (Barany 2011; Gause 2011; Joffé 2011; Lutterbeck 2011; Way 2011; Bellin 2012; Campante & Chor 2012; Jdey 2012; Kuhn 2012; Wall 2012; Brooks 2013; Gaub 2014; Pachon 2014; Signé and Smida 2014; Bou Nassif 2015; Grewal 2016; Kaminski 2017; Mekouar 2017; Gallopin 2019). While there has been a large body of literature related to development and post-Arab spring Tunisia (Masri 2017; Bonnefoy 2018; Grewal and Monroe 2019; Lounnas 2019; Serrano 2019; Dennison and Draege 2020; Gabsi 2020; Matei and Kawar 2020; Mansouri 2022), most of these papers generally lack a sufficient explanation of political changes in the context of Tunisia's historical, cultural and political identity, as well as of the basic characteristics of undemocratic regimes more generally. It is not possible to have a complete political and historical picture of today's Tunisia if we do not understand the context in which it originated and developed.

## Theoretical Approach

**T**HIS ARTICLE will emphasize the importance of the southern Mediterranean region's historical identity via the single case study of Tunisia. The article will critically evaluate its political development until the fall of the Ben Ali regime in January 2011, as well as its influence on the post-Arab spring constitutional period of Tunisia's new democratic system of government. In line with that, the article's main research question is: *What factors are most important in determining the political and historical identity of contemporary Tunisia?* In order to provide an answer to this question, a strategic theoretical approach was applied to the examination of the democratization process that emphasizes the importance of the actors, their decisions, choices, and strategies for the model and the results of the transition, as well as the consolidation of a new order. In other words, in order to understand the features of today's Tunisia, it is necessary to take into account determining factors that stem from the character of the leadership structure of the previous regimes and their practices, as well as the character of the democratization initiators and their role in this process (Blagojević 2015). Therefore, we decided to pay special attention to two specific transition actions:

the Islamic Movement—Ennahda Party and the Tunisian military. We chose these two actors for the following reasons:

1. It is not possible to analyze any Arab Muslim state without considering the relationship between Islam and politics, taking into account that, historically, Shari'a has been a source of the ruling elites' legitimacy. In the contemporary framework, the main question is related to the compatibility of Islam with democracy. According to conservative Muslim thinkers, Islam and democracy were incompatible given the Islamic concept of the absolute sovereignty of God, as well as the view that an elected parliament cannot change God's law—Shari'a—and cannot be the source of law (Voll 2007, 172). Islam is connected to a Muslim tradition that is largely authoritarian or autocratic. However, this does not mean that Islam's original nature is non-democratic. Along those lines, contemporary Muslim thinkers highlight that the basic principles of Islam are democratic because they, *inter alia*, recognize individual and public liberty and the property of subjects (Kaminski 2021). This paper intended to show, through the Tunisian case, that democracy is not exclusively a Western phenomenon and that the separation of the religious and political spheres does not only exist in western Christianity (Kuru 2017). Stepan (2012) offered the concept of 'twin tolerations' that requires that the religious and political domains tolerate each other as independent spheres while still retaining certain levels of interaction. In that sense, this paper focuses on the analyses of the development and position of the first Islamic political organization in Tunisia in relation to secular non-democratic regimes in order to understand its contribution to the democratic transition.

2. Apart from Islam, the military also played an important role in many Arab countries. This was especially true after Arab countries gained independence from colonial rule in the 1950s and 60s, and it represented the biggest challenge to non-democratic governance. During that period, there were numerous military coups d'état (Hansen and Jensen 2008, 30). In the period from the 1970s to 2011, the military had the position of main regime protector (Rubin 2002, 2). However, the Tunisian case shows the marginalized role of the military under non-democratic regimes. The first president of independent Tunisia, Habib Bourguiba, was not a military figure. He did not take power and did not rule with military support. His successor, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali was a former general, but he also minimized the political influence of the military, which was under the control of civilian authorities during his time. In the following pages, we will try to explain this military position, as well as its influence on the results of the Jasmine Revolution, and Tunisia's democratic transition.

In line with the strategic approach to transition, in order to describe and explain the role of Ennahda and the military in Tunisian democratic transition,

firstly it is necessary to consider the type of non-democratic regime, its influence on the actors' role and the model of transition. Among many regime type classifications (Linz and Stepan 1996; Brooker 2009; Merkel 2009; Heywood 2019), the Linz-Stepan classification of authoritarian, totalitarian, post-totalitarian, and sultanistic regimes was chosen on the basis of the following determinants: mobilization, pluralism, ideology, and leadership. In accordance with the structure of political actors, their roles and political strategies in the process of political change, transitologists (Huntington 1991; Linz and Stepan 1996; Darmanović 2002) identified three models of transition: *transformation*—change initiated by the regime, *collapse*—where a radical opposition must overpower regime hardliners, and *regime change through negotiation*, i.e., consensus between government and opposition.

According to Linz and Stepan (1996, 3–4), the democratic transition can be considered as accomplished when four requirements have been met: firstly, a sufficient agreement has been reached about political procedures to produce an elected government; secondly, a government comes to power as the direct result of a free and popular vote; thirdly, government de facto possesses the authority to generate new policies and, fourthly, the executive, legislative, and judicial power generated by the new democracy does not have to share power with other bodies de jure (such as military or religious leaders). However, the process of democratic transition is not the same as the process of democratic consolidation. Democracy is consolidated when it becomes the 'only game in town.' For practical purposes, this means that: behaviorally, no group is seriously engaged in secession or regime change; attitudinally, the majority of the people believe that any further political change must emerge from within the parameters of democratic procedures, and constitutionally, all of the actors in the polity believe that political conflict within the state will be resolved according to established norms and that violations of these norms are likely to be both ineffective and costly (Stepan 2016).

On the basis of the described theoretical framework of the effects of the past forms of the regime and of their practices on the contemporary, transitional processes, we define the main hypothesis of the paper: *The origins and directions of the historical and political developments of Tunisia determine the basic elements of contemporary Tunisian identity*, as well as two sub-hypotheses:

1. *The historical relations between religion (Islam) and politics determine the role and position of religious actors in the democratic transition, and its role influences the transition results.*

2. *The historical relations between the military and politics determine the role and position of the military in the democratic transition, and its role influences the transition results.*

## Methodological Approach

**T**HIS RESEARCH utilized a *single case study as a comparison* method, as developed by Landman (2008, 86–96). The intensiveness of the single-country study allows for “a more detailed look at underlying processes and mechanisms that simply cannot be investigated in studies that compare more countries” (ibid., 90). This method provides a comparative historical analysis between different periods of certain political phenomena and the identification of similarities and differences that help explain it. Also, one should keep in mind that generalizations from single-country studies are limited taking into account that each country has its particular characteristics. However, it provides a more detailed contextual description and classification than can be given by a comparison of more cases (ibid., 86–87).

The described method of analysis was applied in order to compare different periods of Tunisian historical and political development and identify differences and similarities between them. In other words, in this way, the historical context of laying the foundations of the Tunisian government system is explained. Since the scope of this work does not allow for a more detailed description of historical processes and events in Tunisia, only some events—specifically, those most illustrative of the political, cultural, and historical identity of Tunisia’s modern development trends—are referred to. At the same time, we used this method to analyze the basic characteristics of the rule of two presidents of independent Tunisia: Habib Bourguiba, who ruled from 1957 to 1987, and Ben Ali, whose reign began in 1987 and ended in 2011. Also, it was applied to the description and explanation of the state and development of Tunisian democracy after the fall of the Ben-Ali regime on the basis of a previous historical review, especially regarding the relationship between Islam and politics, as well as between the military and politics.

The *single case study as a comparison* method in some way represents a combination of three distinct methods: the historiographical method, the case study method, and the comparative method. The single case study as a comparison method is based on analyses of the available literature and documentation, which included the careful examination of information given by relevant books, academic and newspaper articles, materials of professional organizations and associations, official documents and similar materials related to the political and historical identity of Tunisia.

This article consists of two main sections. The first section assesses the basic characteristics of the Tunisian political system throughout history, from the Arab-Ottoman rule through the French colonial administration to independent Tunisia under the Bourguiba-Ali regime. The second section analyzes the effects

of the past forms of the regime and its practices, including its relations with the Islamic political organization—Ennahda and the military, on the developments since the Jasmine Revolution in 2011. In other words, the latter chapter aims to answer the question: how did the pre-2010 historical premises determine the contemporary transitional processes?

## Tunisian Pre-2010 Historical and Political Development

**N**ORTH AFRICA'S civilizations are known for their history of trading, nomadic lifestyles, and numerous migrations, as well as for their cities created as oases near rivers, springs, or other sources of groundwater. The Mediterranean peninsulas represented detached and independent continents. At first glance, they seem to be linked to the whole of Africa, however they are separated by the Sahara Desert. The Mediterranean region provides an unusual mix of races, religions, customs, and civilizations. On the other hand, it represents unity due to the migrations of people and the numerous roads that pass through it (Braudel 1995). In that sense, in order to have a complete picture of the historical and political identity of contemporary Tunisia, it is necessary to understand the origins and directions of its development in a more detailed manner that takes into account the character and nature of its rules from its inception until today.

### The Historical Legacy of 'Twin Tolerations' and an Apolitical Military

**T**UNISIA WAS included in the historical literature thanks to the Phoenicians who colonized the northwestern African coast, where Carthage was founded in 814 BC.<sup>1</sup> The Carthaginian Constitution guaranteed citizen participation via a bottom-up electoral system that functioned at all levels of the polity, including the king's office (Cherif 2018). In the 7<sup>th</sup> century this area began to be settled by the Arabs. Unlike other conquerors, the Arabs were not satisfied just by conquering the coast, so they began to exert their influence by introducing Islam and the Arabic language. During the Aghlabid dynasty, Tunisia became an important cultural center (Hitti 1964). However, the political presence of Arabs in the Maghreb was limited to a few cities till the 9<sup>th</sup> century, when the Hilalian invasion led to the Arabization of other settlements (except those in mountain and desert areas). The Almoravid dynasty (*al-murabitun*) and the Almohad dynasty (*al-muwahhidun*) were the first and last in the history of

the world to establish a single political control over this region, relying on Islam as a unifying force for both the Berbers and the Arabs (Willis 2012, 13).<sup>2</sup>

After completely conquering this area in 1574, the Ottomans established the province (*beglerbegluk*) and ruled through so-called governors (*regencies*) that mainly acted as political entities rather than as provinces of the empire (Willis 2012, 15), due to the fact that the Ottomans were mainly present in the coastal areas and in the major towns and they were not really involved in the local population's daily life. Thus, the bureaucracy was small. The military's task was to collect taxes. The modern professional military was formed in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century during the rule of Ahmed Bey, who sent officers to France to study. He also established military academies, and modernized the military equipment, resources, and infrastructure. He ultimately ended up increasing the armed forces to 27,000 troops (Gaub 2014).

In 1846, Tunisia was the first country in the Muslim world to abolish slavery, two years before France banned slavery in its dominions, 19 years before it was abolished in the United States, 42 years before it was abolished in Brazil, and 116 years before its abolition in Saudi Arabia (Stepan 2012, 98). The biggest achievement during the period of Ottoman rule over Tunisia was the Fundamental Pact (*'abd al-aman*, in Arabic) issued in Tunis in 1857, which was legally adopted as the country's constitution in 1861. It was the first written constitution in the Arab and Muslim world. It separated the three branches of power, limited the ruler's authority, and held the Bey accountable before parliament (Cherif 2018). The Constitution guaranteed separation between political power and religion, and it was even not explicit that the Bey must be a Muslim (Filiu 2011, 142). It declared that everyone, whatever their religion, had the right[s] to be judged by tribunals, to enjoy complete physical security, and to engage in all types of commerce (Stepan 2012, 98).

France conquered Tunisia in 1881 by various economic means due to Tunisia's bankruptcy and large foreign debt. However, the existing political structure and rulers were not replaced, i.e., the ruler of the protectorate was the *Resident Général* appointed by Paris that was responsible to the Husaynid bey. On the one hand, the French administration entailed the confiscation of land, as well as significant immigration of Europeans, and repression in the case of resistance to colonial control. On the other hand, it introduced new, modern European ideas and reforms, especially in the area of education (Willis 2012, 18–21). The military was part of the French colonial *Armée d'Afrique* and participated in the First and Second World Wars. The only armed forces that were allowed under French rule were the *Beylical Guard* (Gaub 2014).

The economic crisis in France, along with the increasing influence of the United States, which supported the principle of self-determination, the effects

of World War II, the decline of the European population, and the rise of nationalist movements, led to a loss of French control over Tunisia (Willis 2012). In 1920, the so-called “party of the old indigenous elite” emerged—the Destour Party—led by Abdalaziz al-Salib, whose aim was the liberation of Tunisia from French rule (ibid., 87). It was replaced by the new Neo-Destour Party in 1934 as a representative of the provincial bourgeoisie (Harris 2003, 1105) with a French-trained lawyer, Habib Bourguiba, as its president. Neo-Destour put pressure on the French government through numerous strikes, mass demonstrations, and engaged in small-scale violence (Alexander 2013, 477). In April 1955, Bourguiba signed an agreement on the autonomy of Tunisia that was opposed by the General Secretary of the Party, Salah ben Youssef, who believed that it would not lead to Tunisia’s independence (Hurewitz 1969, 406). At the core of the problem was the fact that Bourguiba wanted to apply the French governance model in Tunisia, while Youssef was more focused on Tunisia’s Arab-Muslim identity. In November 1955, French forces suppressed the Youssef faction’s riot, and he eventually fled to Tripoli. Tunisia officially declared its independence on 20 March 1956.<sup>3</sup>

### **Authoritarian Regime: Enforced Secularism and *La Grande Muette***

**U**NDER PRESSURE from Neo-Destour, the Bey allowed the formation of the Constituent Assembly, which deposed him in 1957 and proclaimed the republic with Bourguiba as its first president<sup>4</sup> (Hurewitz 1969, 408). Article 1 of the 1959 Constitution stipulated that “Tunisia is a free, independent and sovereign state. Its religion is Islam, its language is Arabic, and its type of government is the Republic.”

The Constitution guaranteed significant powers to the president, who enforced rules by decrees, while the Parliament of Tunisia was of secondary importance. Bourguiba personalized the State, as well as the system, due to his constitutional powers and rhetorical skills. This is reflected in his statement whereby “there is no system of Tunisia, I am the system” (Willis 2012, 51). That was the result of his practical actions, such as the request for placing his profile picture in stores, enterprises, etc., and naming the main avenues in Tunisia and other cities after him. Moreover, in 1974, Bourguiba proclaimed himself president for life of Tunisia (Alexander 2013, 478). He maintained his power by the method of rotation and replacement of ministers and senior figures in Neo-Destour on a regular basis. Neo-Destour was a mass party with a huge membership and, like the communist parties, allowed Bourguiba complete control of society. It was



the only party in the Tunisian political arena, taking into account that during his thirty years of rule, Bourguiba did not allow free elections. On the other hand, it helped increase literacy and enabled women to pursue higher education (Stepan 2012, 100). The attempt to introduce socialism through a ten-year economic program caused damage to many sectors, especially agriculture. In this context, the Neo-Destour Party changed its name into the Destourian Socialist Party in 1964. In 1976 a new constitution was adopted, which marked a return to a market economy.

Bourguiba was pro-Western, taking bold positions against the Soviet Union during the Cold War. He also did not support the other regional pan-Arab movements. The first major power that recognized Tunisia's independence was the United States, which provided financial support to the Bourguiba regime. In that sense, Bourguiba used Islam<sup>5</sup> as a bulwark against the rise of communism (Gandolfo 2015, 20). At the beginning of his rule, he tried to sustain a balance as both the defender of the Tunisian national identity and of the Islamic faith (ibid.). As noted, Article 1 of the 1959 Constitution avoided declaring Islam as the state religion and enabled Tunisia to become secular while maintaining a clear reference to Islam. However, Bourguiba viewed Islam as a threat in the context of social progress and made efforts to limit its influence in the public sphere. The first step toward the erosion of the *ulema* power was the Personal Status Code (1957) that changed the state's view on women's rights through divorce and marriage law reforms and the reinterpretation of Islamic faith (ibid.). He abolished the religious courts, while in 1957, the religious endowments became state properties. He replaced Zeitouna Mosque University, founded in 737, with the secular and French-inspired University of Tunis. The study of religion in public schools was limited to a single hour a week, while teachers had to teach in French and Arabic (Stepan 2012, 99–100). He condemned the impact of Ramadan on state productivity and advised that fasting should be limited. In fact, the president introduced some kind of state-controlled Islam where imams of the mosques were paid for and controlled by the state. By 1970 many of the disobedient *ulema* had been imprisoned or exiled (Gandolfo 2015, 22). Bourguiba also used women in order to strengthen the secular character of the country. For example, he called the veil an 'odious rag' (ibid., 21) and, in 1981, announced a decree that prohibited the use of the veil in public buildings (Knudsen and Ezbidi 2014, 39). This decree applied to women employed in the public administration and schools, and girls in schools and at universities.

However, this practice helped facilitate in the rise of the Islamist movement that came to be known as the *Islamic Tendency Movement* (known by its French acronym, MIT) in 1981, which was aimed at restoring the Islamic identity of Tunisia and called for the establishment of a multi-party system. The MIT emerged

as the opponent of the concept of *laïcité* or French-style secularism as well as of the import of foreign values and morals (Knudsen and Ezbidi 2014, 38). One of the MIT's founders, Rashid Ghannoushi, became very popular in the late 1970s due to his speeches across the country related to the necessity of returning to Islam. He posed a challenge to the enforced French cultural identity. He pointed out that: "I remember we used to feel like strangers in our own country..." (ibid., 40). Bourguiba mercilessly confronted the activists of the Movement, through arrests, trials, and other repressive measures. He was strongly dissatisfied with the special court decision related to the setting of bombs in hotels in Sousse and Monastir in August 1987. According to the decision, MIT leader Rachid Ghannouchi got life imprisonment rather than the death penalty (Willis 2012, 165).

Bourguiba decided to form a professional military, in line with the French model, taking into account that the military had attempted two coups against him (one in 1957 by supporters of Salah Ben Youssef and a second one in 1962 by young 'Youssefist' former members of the Beylical Guard and Islamists, supported by Algeria) (Willis 2012, 87). In line with the Constitution of 1956, Bourguiba, as the president of the country, was also the supreme commander of the armed forces.<sup>6</sup> He politically isolated and marginalized the military by limiting its size and budget,<sup>7</sup> entrusting the maintenance of the internal order to the powerful security apparatus under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of the Interior, and banning any form of political activity and political association for members of the military, including their membership in the ruling party, access to the political institutions, as well as the right to vote in elections (Hurewitz 1969, 414). In a speech in 1956, Bourguiba said that "members of the military are not free to have political opinions like other citizens" (Willis 2012, 86). The military was known as *la grande muette* ('the big silent one'), due to its apolitical position and non-interference in public affairs.

As noted, the military did not have a privileged position under Bourguiba's rule, and it was marginalized. Also, Islamists were dissatisfied with Bourguiba's state-controlled Islam, as well as with the repressive measures against MIT members. In general, the population of Tunisia was unhappy with the rising cost of basic commodity prices. The repression of the security apparatus against the workers led to a deterioration of the relationship between Bourguiba and the Trade Union. The country was on the brink of a civil war. Eventually Bourguiba's fell via a bloodless 'doctors' coup<sup>8</sup> organized by Prime Minister Ben Ali, on the night of 7 November 1987 (Alexander 2013, 479).

After the removal of Bourguiba, Ben Ali<sup>9</sup> began with the implementation of reforms. He amnestied many political prisoners, eliminated the institute of *presidency for life*, abolished censorship and allowed media freedom. He also signed a

new National Pact with sixteen political parties and organizations, and renamed the Destourian Socialist Party to the Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD) (Alexander 2013, 480). However, the 1989 elections for the National Assembly were not free and fair. Ali did not amend the electoral legislation to allow opposition parties to participate in fair elections. The president turned opposition parties against one another by proposing that all parties run on single lists and split the seats in parliament in accordance with a predetermined formula. This was in the interest of the RCD (ibid.). Ali refused to legalize the MIT which, *inter alia*, changed its name to Ennahda (meaning Renaissance) in order to prove its democratic nature. Ben Ali allowed its members to compete in elections as independent candidates, and they won 15 percent of the vote, while secular parties received less than 5 percent (Willis 2012, 167). The elections showed that the strongest opposition force was the Islamist party Ennahda, as well as that Ben Ali was more of an autocrat than a democrat (Alexander 2013, 480). Many members of Ennahda were blamed and arrested for clashes with security forces and plotting attacks against the government, including committing a bombing where two persons died. In the next few years, at least twenty thousand Ennahda members were tried for subversion and sent to jail, and about ten thousand went into exile (Stepan 2012, 100). All Islamic parties were subsequently banned.

Ben Ali legitimized this decision by pointing to the bloody civil war between Islamists and the military in neighboring Algeria (Stepan 2012, 100). In the sense of protection, national stability, and security, Ben Ali applied a 'zero tolerance' policy vis-à-vis the Islamists (Knudsen and Ezbidi 2014, 40). Ennahda was accused of forming a militant wing, "Special Apparatus," that carried out acts of violence aimed at overthrowing Ali. For example, in September 1991, the government announced that it had discovered that Ennahda was planning to procure missiles from Afghanistan in order to bring down Ben Ali's plane. However, the Ennahda's leader Mohammed Ghannouchi denied these claims (Willis 2012, 175–177).

Ben Ali minimized the political influence of the military through the reduction of military troops and the military budget. In 2010, Tunisia had 27,000 active Army members, 4,800 Navy members, and 4,000 Air Force members (Cordesman, Burke, and Nerguizian 2010, 49–50). The military budget amounted to only 1.4% of Tunisia's overall GDP (Brooks 2013, 210). In comparison with other countries of the Arab Uprisings, Tunisia had the smallest military with the lowest spending. Apart from that, Ben Ali introduced forced retirement for the most competent officers (Cordesman, Burke, and Nerguizian 2010, 49–50). The main criteria for the recruitment of the top military officials were loyalty and regional affiliation. For instance, 40% of the members of the

Supreme Council of the Armed Forces were from the Sahel region, which represents only 24% of the total Tunisian population. On the other hand, Ben Ali invested in the privileged security units under the authority of the Ministry of the Interior, which performed all the “dirty jobs” of the regime (Grewal 2016, 4). The described relation to the military based on favoritism and nepotism contributed to the marginalization and dissatisfaction of the officer corps. The cooperation with colleagues from the United States as well as with professional military academies contributed to the building of a military ethos, organizational norms and internal autonomy of the military as an institution.

In addition, President Ben Ali introduced the so-called *controlled liberalism*, which included the functioning of the private sector under government control, or the “privatization of the state” (Willis 2012, 242). A business could be started only by bribing Ali and his family. The adult literacy rate of Tunisians increased to 80%. However, the unemployment rate of young graduates was about 40% (Alexander 2013, 488). There was an evident significant gap between the coastal areas that made profits from tourism and the poorer inland parts of the country (Willis 2012, 243).

Ben Ali technically had opponents in the presidential elections which took place in 1994, 1999, 2004, and 2009, but still won over 80 percent of the vote thanks to the media, coercion, and deception. In May 2002, the government organized a referendum that raised the maximum age for the president, abolished the limit on the number of terms a president may serve and granted the president immunity from prosecution for all acts carried out in office (Alexander 2013, 481). Enforced secularism and years of harsh government crackdowns led to Carroll’s observation (2007) that political Islam was close to extinction. However, it started to recover among young people, mainly students, because of the lack of political space, especially in the light of regional events such as the US “war on terror” after September 2001 in Iraq and Afghanistan (ibid.). Apart from that, as a consequence of authoritarian repression and hyper-consumerism, a number of Tunisians began to reaffirm their Muslim identity through personal piety and engagement in the social sphere; for the first time in their life, women chose to wear the veil. This was not politically motivated either, rather it was directly connected to personal development. Starting with the mid-2000s, religious associations emerged such as the Quranic association Riadh al-Nasr (Knudsen and Ezbidi 2014, 43), given the absence of an identity that could combine the best from the West and the best from Islam as the guide to private ethical behavior. These associations show the transformation of Islamism from a state-centric political project to a practice of Islam that is focused on social activism rather than politics (ibid., 45). This change of Tunisian Islamism is also the result of the fact that Ennahda activities for over two decades were very limited.

In the 2000s, it started to change the strategy of confronting the regime on its own towards cross-ideological cooperation with other opposition movements in order to show its commitment to democratic politics, respect for individual rights, and support for women's rights.

In June 2003, amid increasing corruption, nepotism, and unemployment, a document titled "Call from Tunis" was signed by representatives of four Tunisian major non-regime parties: Ennahda, the Congress for the Republic (CPR), Ettakatol, and the Progressive Democratic Party (PDP). The document, *inter alia*, stipulated that: 1) any future elected government would have to be "founded on the sovereignty of the people as the sole source of legitimacy"; and 2) the state, while showing "respect for the people's identity and its Arab-Muslim values," would provide "the guarantee of liberty of beliefs to all and the political neutralization of places of worship" (Stepan 2012, 96). On the basis of this document, signatory parties had formed *the October 18 Coalition for Rights and Freedom in Tunisia*, committed to a democratically elected government, the release of political prisoners, the protection of freedom of conscience and association, and the civic state. Ennahda committed to respecting women's rights and freedom of conscience, while secular parties agreed to recognize the Arab and Muslim identity of Tunisia (Alexander 2013, 483).

The coalition, together with trade unions and some illegal parties, launched numerous protests across the country, including a four-month long miners' protests in the Gafsa Mining Basin in 2008 and in the southern town of Ben Guerdane in 2010 (Signé and Smida 2014, 2). In line with that, the self-immolation of a vegetable seller named Mohamed Bouazizi on 17 December of the same year in the town of Sidi Bouzid triggered the Arab uprisings. Social media and smartphone reports on clashes with the police and then by Al Jazeera and other media were seen around the world, contributed to sharing information on the locations of the protest, and thus to the revolt's growth. In a speech on national television on 13 January 2011, Ben Ali made a promise to reduce food prices and not to seek reelection. However, by this time, it was too little and too late for the protesters (Alexander 2013, 483), who forced him and his family to flee to Saudi Arabia.

## The Post-Spring Period of Tunisian Democracy

**A**FTER BEN Ali fled to Saudi Arabia, the President of the National Assembly, Fouad Mebazaa, took over the presidency, while Mohammed Ghannouchi took over the position of prime minister of the transitional government. The transitional government guaranteed amnesty to political pris-

oners, froze the RCD funds, formed a commission to initiate political reforms, and conducted an investigation into credible or arguable allegations of the criminal conduct of the former regime (Alexander 2013, 484).

In February, civil society activists formed the Committee to Protect the Revolution, which acted as a watchdog organization over government activities related to the implementation of democratic reforms. At the end of the month, Prime Minister Ghannouchi resigned under pressure from below and was replaced by former Foreign Minister Mohamed Beji Caid Essebsi. Essebsi was tasked with preparing elections, while the RCD was dissolved and more than 100 parties were registered before the election (Alexander 2013, 485).

On 23 October 2011, Tunisia held its first free election for the Constituent Assembly since gaining independence from France in 1956. Ennahda won 89 seats out of 217 and 37 percent of the popular vote. It is an impressive result, taking into account that it had virtually disappeared from the country for over two decades and was only registered on 1 March 2011. The Ennahda got support because: 1. it revived old networks and structures and created new ones across the country with the help of young people; 2. its members enjoyed legitimacy in the eyes of the public due to their uncompromising stance and personal suffering; 3. the co-founder of the party and its “intellectual leader,” Rachid Ghannouchi, who had spent 22 years in exile in London, returned to Tunisia and immediately declared that he would not seek an elected position, and 4. lack of unity among the other parties (Knudsen and Ezbidi 2014, 52). Ennahda was composed of four sociological groups: the returnees from exile, the former political prisoners; those who had remained silent during the repressive era, and a new generation of middle-class Islamic activists (*ibid.*, 51–54) who, as noted in the previous section, has been looking for a life based on personal piety and social engagement on Islamic values.

Ennahda, as the most successful Islamic party, left political Islam and entered into Muslim democracy that uses faith as the source of inspiration for its center-right policies (Heneghan and Kennel-Shank 2016, 13). It accepted the concept of civil state, *al-dawla al-madaniya*, rather than an Islamic one. The concept of “secular” is avoided because of its historical connection with colonialism and Westernization and equalization with irreligiosity (Gerges 2013, 397). It declared its support for political pluralism, pragmatism, moderation, as well as its commitment to building a democratic Tunisia in cooperation with other political subjects (*ibid.*, 398). Ennahda’s aim is to fight against poverty and joblessness while promoting public health and education, as any other ‘ordinary’ political party. It supported Moncef Marzouki, a liberal human rights activist, as president, while, for instance, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt fielded its own presidential candidate. Ennahda showed a strong commitment to building

institutions, respecting human and minority rights, individual freedoms and the rule of law. In that context, Said Ferjani, a rising leader within Ennahda, noted: “In this golden opportunity, I am not interested in control. I am interested in delivering the best charismatic system, a charismatic, democratic system. This is my dream” (ibid., 399). Ennahda supported women’s political participation, taking into account that it had the largest number of women parliamentarians (ibid., 411) who raised awareness of gender equality in employment and education, as well as the freedom to choose or reject Islamic dress. For instance, Souad Abderrahim is a 47-year-old member of the Constituent Assembly who prefers tailored suits, stiletto heels, and not wearing a veil. In that sense, she described herself as “liberal, with an Islamic base” (ibid., 396).

The first organization of the Muslim world was based on Shari’a that protected the society from rulers’ misbehavior (Filali-Ansary 2016, 100–101). The first significant challenge to this order arose at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when it encountered European forces with hitherto unseen new weapons, i.e., significant innovations in science and technology (ibid., 101). The next challenge is the introduction of constitutionalism as a solution for irresponsible and unfree governments, where legitimacy is based on secular goals. Since Europeans came with weapons, not textbooks, there was a great aversion to everything European, with an emphasis on preserving Islamic identity, authenticity, and heritage. These are some of the reasons for the inconsistency of the actions of various political organizations based on Islam. An appropriate balance needs to be found between what tradition dictates and the demands of the modern age, especially globalization. The dilemma is whether to follow the firmly established religious norms that cannot be called into question or the norms of modern secular society that call into question the religious norms and thus basic identity (ibid., 101–103). Within this closed circle, the development of democracy becomes difficult, almost impossible. That is why Ennahda’s move is very significant. Ennahda’s leaders have made a political turn that is described as an imitation of the Christian Democratic parties of postwar Western Europe (Heneghan and Kennel-Shank 2016, 13).

In addition to drafting a new constitution, the Constituent Assembly had the task of appointing a new government and creating the preconditions for holding parliamentary and presidential elections. Parliamentary elections were held on 26 October 2014, where the secular party, Nidaa Tounes, won the majority, or 86 seats, while Ennahda took 69 seats (NDI 2015, 52). The presidential election was held on 23 November of the same year. More than 20 candidates took part in the election, 55.68% of the vote was won by 87-year-old Essebsi representing Nidaa Tounes, while Mohamed Moncef Marzouki got 44.32% of the vote in the first round of the elections (ibid., 55).

The adoption of the Constitution in January 2014, as well as the holding of parliamentary and presidential elections, indicate the great democratic potential of Tunisia. The fact that the Nidaa Tounes party entered into a grand coalition with the Islamist party Ennahda shows the strength of Tunisian democracy. It accepted the status of the largest opposition party and did not even have its own candidate in the presidential election. Regarding the content of the new Constitution, Ennahda's stance was that it should simply acknowledge Islam as the state religion, as the old constitution did, while it was trying to strike a balance between the Salafis and secularists. This indicates Ennahda's liberalism and modernity, and therefore it could be recognized as a driving force of progressive change and a protector of the democratic transition and consolidation.

In addition, the reason why, of all countries affected by the 'Arab Spring,' Tunisia is the only one on the path to democracy has to do with the depoliticized role of the military in this entire transition process. In accordance with the official statement of General Rachid Ammar, in the 'post-spring' period, the military acted within the limits of the Constitution as a guarantor of the Revolution. Unlike the Egyptian military, which is "loyal primarily to itself and not to the people" (Kirkpatrick 2011), the Tunisian military decided to contribute to building a democratic order by withdrawing from the political sphere and providing a framework for conducting political processes. In other words, instead of looking for opportunities to amass political power, the military decided to open the political space to bureaucracy, political parties, and the civil society. Tunisian military activities included the protection of public property and public buildings, the protection of people from police violence, the participation in extinguishing forest fires and rescuing flood victims (Parker 2013). The military mission has been expanded to fight against terrorism, i.e., the jihad on the border with Algeria, and defend the external border from the illegal entry of migrants and weapons from war-torn Libya (Sayigh 2014). Due to the fact that the Tunisian military did not participate in nation-building and economic development programs, the majority of the military was not affected by corruption and cronyism. Unlike other Arab countries, the military in Tunisia managed to build a corporate identity independent of the state, based on a strong sense of belonging, unity, and coherence. The 1959 Constitution sanctioned the independent role of the military in the political system.

The promotional role of the Tunisian military in the transition can be explained by the following features of the military during the Ben Ali regime: the high level of institutionalization; the low level of involvement in the administrative apparatus; the appropriate legal framework; the privileged position of the parallel security services; the weak economic position; the homogenous structure of the military in religious, ethnic and tribal terms; the close ties of the mili-



tary with society; the fact that the regime did not enjoy legitimacy in the eyes of the rank-and-file, general staff and public; the existence of the professional military academies; the professional norms and values of the military; the foreign assistance and training. Consequently, the survival of the military did not depend on the survival of the regime. Additionally, the constellation of events at the moment of the uprisings, especially the size and the magnitude of the protests, affects the position of the military in this process (Blagojevic 2018). In line with a report of the American Institute for Peace on Tunisia's security sector reform, a year after the Revolution, there was no need to establish civilian control over the military (Hanlon 2011). However, in accordance with the new democratic rules of the game, it is necessary to establish democratic-parliamentary oversight of the armed forces.

Apart from that, the long history of constitutionalism in Tunisia could help explain the relative success of the country's democratic transition, as well as its active and rapidly developing civil society. The National Dialogue Quartet, a coalition of four civil society organizations, was awarded the 2015 Nobel Peace Prize for facilitating a compromise between Ennahda and the secular opposition after the assassination of secular politician Chokri Belaid.

When President Essebsi died in office on 25 July 2019, the new Constitution provided a procedural transition period and new presidential elections within 90 days. In the presidential election, 72% of the vote was won by an independent candidate, law Professor Kais Saied, with a number of demands for the establishment of a presidential system of government. This indicates a decline in the support and confidence in the strength and capacity of political parties. A number of coalition governments composed of Islamists and secularists lacked a clear political and economic agenda with a precise vision of the country's future (Al-Qudurat 2020).

According to Al-Qudurat (2020), the pursuit of political consensus through the creation of a hybrid system of government—based on the division of executive power between the prime minister and the president—created a dysfunctional and unconsolidated parliament and has therefore been an obstacle to democratic consolidation. In addition, consensus made a quota system of political parties where positions are filled regardless of competencies and experience. This has led to increased corruption and nepotism. According to Transparency International (2019), the corruption index in Tunisia in 2019 was 43 out of 100, which is a significant increase compared to 2015 when it was only 38. This, among other things, led to a low turnout in the parliamentary elections of October 2019; turnout was below 42%, significantly lower when compared to the previous elections. In these elections, the majority of votes went to Ennahda, 52 seats out of 217, which is less than in the previous elections (Arieff 2020, 5).

Ennahda failed to get the required majority in parliament to form a government. As a result, President Saïed asked the technocrat Elyes Fakhfakh—a former finance minister—to form a new government. In February 2020, Fakhfakh received the required majority support in the parliament, from Ennahda, the left-wing Harakat al Chaab party, the socio-democratic party Tayar al Dimuqrati, and the secular center party Tahya Tounes (*ibid.*, 6).

The government's debt increased from 41% in 2010 to over 70% in 2019, and the unemployment rate rose from 12% to 15%. The coronavirus epidemic also contributed to a weaker economy, with activity down by 7% and a doubling of Tunisia's budget deficit to 14% in 2020, which represents the highest level of deficit in almost 40 years. The economic malaise encouraged many younger Tunisians to emigrate abroad to reach a higher standard of living or join certain terrorist groups. The question remains whether political freedoms have a significant value in the face of the economic downturn and constant instability (Serrano 2020). In other words, while Tunisia has achieved a successful democratic transition, its democracy is by no means consolidated at this point.

## Conclusion

**T**HE CASE of Tunisia was selected because it serves as a good example of the intersection of different cultural, historical, religious, and civilizational directions in the Mediterranean region. As previously noted, in relation to the surrounding Arab countries, Tunisia has consistently shown its potential for being a democratic nation due to its long history of constitutionalism and religious tolerance dating back to the Ottoman and French periods of colonial rule. On the other hand, the tendency of dictators to have absolute power and authority led to fifty years of rule with limited civil and political rights. In line with the theoretical strategic approach to transition, the social, economic, and cultural life in Tunisia was developed in the framework of an authoritarian regime structure with clear sultanistic elements. The first president of the independent Republic of Tunisia, Habib Bourguiba, and his successor Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, put numerous restrictions on opposition activities. During the Bourguiba rule, elections were not held, and during the rule of Ben Ali, they only served as a means for creating a parliamentary majority that supported the government (Szmolka 2014, 23). The personalistic rule of Bourguiba and Ben Ali was characterized by their patrimonial cultural tendencies. In their regimes' frameworks, there were only regime hardliners and radical opposition figures. This implied transition via the collapse of the Ben Ali regime due to the pressure

from mass people protests—the Jasmine Revolution. In this process, the Islamic party—Ennahda—and the military played special roles, as follows:

1. *The historical relationship between religion (Islam) and politics determines the role and position of religion in the democratic transition, and its role influences the transition results.* Ennahda changed its mission from state Islamization to participation in political life as *un parti comme les autres*. It is the result of 19<sup>th</sup> century Tunisia that played a pioneering role in building constitutional and religiously neutral state structures. The high degree of de facto autonomy that it enjoyed as a nominal province of the fading Ottoman Empire allowed it to become arguably the most liberal and rights-friendly polity in the Arab world. The important aspects of Tunisia’s cultural heritage at the time of independence in 1956 were “twin tolerations–friendly” (Stepan 2012). That means that the state was tolerant towards religious citizens and vice-versa. The post-independence president of Tunisia, Bourguiba, imposed authoritarian secularism from above, a so-called “state-controlled Islam” that led to the emergence of political Islam, i.e., the Islamic political organization MIT that aimed to restore Tunisia’s Islamic identity against the prevailing French-inspired secular one. Bourguiba regularly harassed MIT members through arrests, trials, and other repressive measures. His successor, Ben Ali, allowed them to individually run in the 1989 elections, but after the MIT’s good election result, Ben Ali started to take the same, and at times even worse, measures than Bourguiba. Ben Ali applied ‘zero tolerance’ towards Islamists, and they gradually disappeared from Tunisia’s institutional and public life. However, state-enforced secularism, coupled with consumerist culture, created the apolitical need of Sunni Muslim Tunisians to restore Islamic faith and customs in their individual lives and through social associations. The historical relationship between Islam and politics described above determined the democratic role of the Ennahda in Tunisia’s transition towards democracy. It showed its commitment to democratic governance even before Ben Ali’s fall. Ennahda did this via cooperation with secular opposition parties and as well as through the political documents that they produced. They sought to make a clear distinction from the so-called Islamic State Movement that discredited political Islam, as well as to avoid Egypt’s scenario where the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood has been banned and persecuted since the military coup in 2013 due to, *inter alia*, its religious activities. On the other hand, Ennahda failed to resolve economic problems and lost a significant level of support in the post-2011 elections.

2. *The historical relations between the military and politics determine the role and position of the military in the democratic transition, and its role influences the transition results.* Dictators’ policies toward the members of the armed forces came up

as the causal factor behind the military's role in the uprisings. In the political and economic sense, the military was isolated and marginalized as the result of the Ottoman and French legacy, as well as due to a set of legal and institutional measures. They invested in a security apparatus that performed 'dirty jobs' for the regime. Thus, the military had a closer relationship with society and was accepted as a part of society, especially taking into account that the structure of the military reflected the ethnic homogeneity of society. The military expenditures in Tunisia represented the smallest percentage of GDP in the region, and it did not have a share in state enterprises. In the educational sense, training programs existed at all levels, including professional academies and international assistance, i.e., foreign training. Thus, the military built a strong internal cohesion and institutional resilience. On the other hand, the political and economic marginalization of the military indicates that its survival as an institution did not depend on the regime's survival, particularly bearing in mind that Ben Ali lost both internal and international legitimacy. The ratio between the regime and the protesters was on the protesters' side. The fact that the military did not suppress the protesters and that it had taken a neutral stance in the uprisings enabled the fall of the Ben Ali regime. The role of the military in the post-transition period is also very important in the context of the establishment and consolidation of a new regime. The military decided to open the political space for bureaucracy, political parties, the civil society, and, consequently, to democracy.

These two hypotheses, tested through the methodological approach of a *single case study as a comparison*, validate the main hypothesis of the paper: *The origins and directions of the historical and political developments of Tunisia determine the basic elements of contemporary Tunisian identity*. In other words, today's democratic Tunisian identity is the result of previous developments, inter alia, the described positions of previous regimes towards religious citizens and the military, as well as the history of constitutionalism from the Carthaginian Constitution to the new one, as well as the 19<sup>th</sup> century 'twin tolerance.' The proof of the Tunisian democratic identity is the achieved democratic transition, in line with the four aforementioned Linz-Stepan criteria: the election process is based on consensus; it is free and fair; the government has the power to produce laws and policies and the new democracy's executive, judicial and legislative branches do not share power with other institutions.

The undemocratic character of Middle Eastern regimes is often attributed to Islam, which is contradicted by the growth of democracy in many Muslim-majority countries, such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and Nigeria, as well as by the struggle for democracy and constitutionalism in the Middle East in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Tunisia is a good example that Islam and democ-

racy can successfully cooperate and that democracy is not just a Western phenomenon.

The adoption of the Constitution in January 2014 and the holding of parliamentary and presidential elections indicate the great democratic potential of Tunisia. However, Tunisia is not yet a consolidated democracy, especially considering that the bad economic situation, high unemployment rate, corruption, nepotism, etc., have led to a loss of confidence in the strength of political parties and the quality of their programs. This is evidenced by the low turnout in the 2019 parliamentary elections, as well as by the significant support of over 70% for the non-party candidate in the 2019 presidential elections. That indicates dissatisfaction with the current system of government, especially in the context of economic instability and poor development. Freedom of expression was achieved with the fall of the Ben Ali regime on 14 January 2011, but the ten-years-old new government thus far has failed to ensure enduring economic stability and progress. This points out the problem of the real progress of society in relation to the stagnation under Ben Ali.

Understanding the formation of the social and political organization of Tunisia through European, African, and Middle Eastern activities in this area is important in the context of the study of the Southern Mediterranean region, considering how close it is to Europe. Countries and regions—like people—are the result of their previous experiences. Tunisia is the result of the influence of Berbers, Arabs, and its primary European colonizer, France. The conflict between the civilizations of North Africa and long-time European influence resulted in an unstable political situation and a solid institutional framework. By perceiving the problem of crossing different influences, their consequences, and the basic characteristics of the Tunisian regimes, we have tried to highlight the importance of a detailed study of this subject from the standpoint of history, political science, sociology, and culture. This is especially important in the light of the geostrategic position of a region that for centuries has been under powerful political, economic, military, and cultural pressure from various forces. Therefore, in the context of describing the historical and political identity of the country where the so-called Arab Spring began, this study is critically important, *inter alia*, in defining foreign policy goals and strategies in relation to this region, primarily to Tunisia. In addition, it is a good basis for further research regarding Tunisian historical and political development in different periods and from different points of view, especially in the area of transitology that is focused on regime change.



## Notes

1. Scipio Aemilianus destroyed Carthage in 146 BC and established the Roman province of Africa (Maškin 1951). During the great migration of barbarian peoples, in May 429 Vandals and Alans crossed the straits of Gibraltar, arrived in North Africa and established the African province. The Byzantine Emperor Justinian sent his captain with 18,000 troops to Africa, which landed on the shores of Carthage and in only several weeks defeated the Vandals (Ostrogorsky 1969).
2. In this way, the significant differences were established between the Maghreb, representing the western part of the Arab world, and the Mashreq, as the eastern Arab world. The reason for classifying Libya in one or another group comes from the fact that the Almohads had control of the western part of modern Libya. Also, the dynasty founded the Maliki School of Islamic law as the official base of the Shariah, which is still the dominant and official school in the region (Willis 2012).
3. The first organized uprising in 1938 was brutally crushed by the French government. This was not the case with the uprisings in 1952 which turned into guerrilla warfare.
4. With a clear explanation that the Bey did not contribute to the achievement of independence, and that he collaborated with the colonial authorities.
5. The socio-demographic composition of the society was homogeneous. In the mid-1960s, more than 95% of the population were Sunni Arabs (Hurewitz 1969, 398).
6. Constitution of 1 June 1959 as Amended to the Constitutional Act No. 2008–52 of 28 July 2008, <http://corpus.learningpartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/Tunisia-Constitution-2008-English.pdf>.
7. Compared to other countries in the region, Tunisia had the lowest percentage of military expenditures: maximum of 2% of GDP.
8. It was alleged that Bourguiba had dementia (Stepan 2012, 100).
9. Ben Ali joined the army when he was 15 years old. In the '60s he was appointed to the position of head of Military Security, and in 1984 he became the director of National Security, and then he came to the position of secretary of National Defense, and minister of Internal Affairs, and in the end the prime minister of Tunisia (Willis 2012, 96).

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**Abstract****The Political and Historical Identity of the North African Mediterranean Region:  
A Case Study: Tunisia**

The paper outlines the importance of historical identity in the Southern Mediterranean region through a case study of Tunisia. It explores Tunisia's political development up until the fall of the Ben Ali regime in January 2011, and its influence on the post-Arab spring period of constitutionalism of the new democratic government system. The theoretical framework of this paper involves a strategic approach to transition, emphasizing the influence of the historical relationship between religion (Islam) and politics on the role of the Islamic party in transition. The influence of the historical relationship between the military and politics on the role of the military in transition is also evaluated. These transition actors are chosen for a deeper investigation because of their historically negative image in Arab societies. In line with all available data, this article shows that the pre-independence 'twin tolerations' between the State and religious citizens as well as the civilian control over the military positively influenced Tunisia's contemporary democratic development. Post-independence Bourguiba's 'state-controlled Islam' and Ben Ali's 'zero tolerance' towards Islamists, somewhat paradoxically, contributed to the reaffirmation of Tunisian Islamic values and Ennahda's concept of Muslim democracy. The political and economically marginalized position of the military determined its promotional role in the democratic transition. Applying the *single case study as comparison* method developed by Landman and Linz-Stepan, we came to the conclusion that, due to the positive role of Ennahda and the military, Tunisia achieved a successful democratic transition even though its democracy is not yet fully consolidated.

**Keywords**

historical identity, Ennahda, military, democratic transition, Tunisia