

*Viewpoints*  
No. 25

# Violence Unsettles Tunisia's Democratic Transition

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Tunisia's transition to democracy, widely regarded as the most successful to emerge from the five uprisings that shook the Arab world in 2011, is being seriously threatened by violence in the wake of a prominent leftist politician's assassination in early February. The killing of Chokri Belaid has not only triggered a showdown within the ruling Islamic Ennahda Party between its moderate and fundamentalist wings but also deepened the hostility between secularists and Islamists within Tunisian society.

*April 2013*

*Middle East Program*





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The killing of leftist opposition leader Chokri Belaid, 48, has not only triggered a showdown within the ruling Islamic Ennahda ("Renaissance") Party between its moderate and fundamentalist wings but also deepened the hostility between secularists and Islamists within Tunisian society. That rift had already made the transition a political high-wire act for Ennahda ruling over an uneasy coalition government with two secular parties.

While Belaid's assassin has not yet been captured, the government has declared an extremist Salafi cell as the mastermind. This disclosure has brought to a head persistent secularist demands that Ennahda crack down on Salafi-inspired violence. Because Salafis constitute a growing political force, Ennahda has been reluctant to alienate them, particularly since parliamentary elections are scheduled in late fall after a new constitution is approved by early summer.

Rachid Ghannouchi, Ennahda's spiritual and political leader, spelled out the dilemma he feels in dealing with Salafis at a Stanford University-sponsored conference on Arab reform and democracy in Tunis in late March. He readily acknowledged that violence now presents "one of the major challenges facing the Tunisian revolution" and blamed the danger on "some religious groups" and the increasingly acrimonious political discourse between secularists and Islamists. The latter, he said, had led to Belaid's killing, and he fears that a precedent had been set for other political assassinations.

"We fear the dangers ahead," he said. "Violence is a threat to us all."

While admitting to "some deficiency" in the interim government's handling of Salafi violence, Ghannouchi at the same time defended its cautious approach, saying "people should not be jailed for their ideas" and "we don't want to put people in prison and torture them" the same way the former regime of ousted President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali had done. "We could dissolve the Salafi networks, but we don't want a police state under the pretext of defending modernity."

Later, at a second conference organized by the Tunis-based Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy on March 29, Ghannouchi said he was aware of "some plots to topple the government" and urged its Salafi and leftist secular opponents to use the ballot box instead.

"To those who plot against us, I have a message: the Arab Spring has not turned into a fundamentalist winter or a secularist winter," he said. "Freedom is not a slogan. It is a reality."

Belaid was gunned down as he left his home in Tunis on February 6 by a lone shooter assisted by an accomplice who drove him away on a motorcycle. Three suspects have so far been apprehended, including the driver (and his motorcycle). The shooter, identified as Kamel Gadhgadhi, reportedly studied in the United States before returning to Tunisia with his American girlfriend. He is still on the run. Belaid's killing shocked the nation, which had not seen an assassination of a major political figure since the 1961 killing in Frankfurt, Germany of Salah Ben Youssef, another leftist politician who had been the main rival of Tunisia's first post-independence president, Habib Bourguiba.

Within hours of Belaid's killing, then Prime Minister Hamadi Jebali announced the dissolution of his government and intention to replace it with another government of technocrats until new elections this fall. However, his own party rejected his plan, leading to Jebali's resignation and a new coalition government under former Interior Minister Ali Laarayedh was formed.

Jebali, still Ennahda's secretary general, is widely viewed as the leader of the party's "moderate" wing, and his defeat is a sign of a lurch to the right in favor of Islamic hardliners sympathetic to the Salafis. Since Ghannouchi had opposed Jebali's effort to form a government of technocrats, the Ennahda leader is now viewed by secularists and Jebali supporters alike as having aligned himself with the party's hardline faction.

Part of the political debate now revolves around the question of Ghannouchi's true colors in light of his past middle-of-the-road posturing among Ennahda's contending moderates and radicals. In a major concession to the secularists, he had convinced his own party to stop pressing mentioning of the *shari'a*, Islamic law, in the new constitution. He also sided with secular women in their demand that the constitution refer explicitly to "the equality" of sexes, while Ennahda's own deputies in the National Constituent Assembly had proposed only referring to women's "complementary" role to men in the family and society.

On the other hand, Ghannouchi has stoutly defended the right of Ennahda supporters to form Leagues for the Protection of the Revolution, whose partisan activities have helped fuel the tensions between secularists and Islamists. He also has shown sympathy for the Salafis who form an important constituency inside Ennahda.

The internal Ennahda crisis provoked by Belaid's assassination came in the wake of scores of Salafi attacks on bars serving alcohol, modern art shows, and secular and labor union meetings. In addition, the Tunisian public has recently become aware that hundreds of young Tunisians have joined the "jihad" in Syria against President Bashar al-Assad or Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. Among the 30 terrorists who seized a gas plant in southern Algeria in January were 11 Tunisians.

The French-language newspaper *La Presse de Tunisie* estimated that the number of youth already recruited to fight in Syria had reached "more than 6,000," though it offered no hard evidence for such a high figure. It decried the existence of Salafi recruiting networks it charged the government was ignoring. Among the recruits, it said, were many of the 1,200 hardened jihadists from wars in Iraq and Afghanistan who had been freed from prison after the fall of President Ben Ali in January 2011.

(In early April, Egypt extradited back to Tunisia Sheik Imed Ben Salah, a Salafi preacher who was found with 17 fake passports allegedly used to shuttle Tunisian recruits to Syria. The sheik was first arrested but then released by Tunisia's attorney general.)

The focus of *La Presse's* two-part series was the impact returning Tunisian jihadists were having on society, noting their newfound scorn for Ennahda because it did not insist on including Islam's *shari'a* in the new constitution.

The local press has also been highlighting the discovery of secret arms caches and armed Salafi groups operating in the desert and mountains of southern Tunisia. Adding to the public alarm was the comment of the outgoing head of the U.S. Africa Command, General Carter Ham, who visited Tunis in late March. "It is very clear to me that Al-Qaeda intends to establish a presence in Tunisia," Carter warned.

In apparent response, the new Laarayedh government has just announced it is setting up "crisis cells" to monitor Salafi terrorist activities inside the country, particularly on its borders with Libya and Algeria. These cells are also supposed to collect information on networks recruiting Tunisians to fight in Syria. Still, neither Ennahda nor the government has come out in clear opposition to the recruitment.

The leader of Tunisia's extremist Ansar al-Sharia, suspected by U.S. officials of ties to Al-Qaeda, has warned his group was ready to launch a jihad against Laarayedh's government if it went ahead with its crackdown on the Salafi militants. "We shall direct our war against him (Laarayedh) until he is toppled and dumped in history's garbage bin," Seifallah Ben Hussein (aka Abou Ayyad) said in a March 22 interview with the Arab daily *Asharq al-Awsat*.

Ansar al-Sharia partisans led the mob that stormed the U.S. embassy and American international school in Tunis last September in protest over a film made in California denigrating the Prophet Mohammed. The embassy still has not recovered, operating with a reduced number of diplomats serving on short-term assignment and barred from bringing their families.

The secular-Islamic rift plaguing Tunisia was on full display during the two international conferences held here in late March where "the Tunisian model" of democratic transition was one focus of debate. Ghannouchi found himself repeatedly under attack from his secular critics for "double speak" toward the Salafis as well as his endorsement of the Leagues for the Protection of the Revolution.

At the two conferences and again in an interview, Ghannouchi's unequivocally defended the leagues so long as they operated within the law, a decision the courts would have to make. "These leagues are civil associations and must answer to the law of associations and be punished by the law if they violate it," he said. Otherwise, "how can we disband them?"



*The opinions expressed herein are those of the author and do not reflect those of the Wilson Center.*

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