Hizb al-Nahḍah: from revolution to government and to a second referendum

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The year 2011 witnessed watershed events in the countries of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), resulting in long-awaited political and social transformation, with Tunisia acting as catalyst and modus operandi for the other countries of the region. Although the so-called ‘Arab Spring’ now seems to be gripped in a stalemate in Egypt, where vagueness still prevails, and in Syria and Libya, where the security situation continues to be extremely precarious and unstable, there seems to be a wind of change in the political context in Tunisia, where on 26 October 2014 the population witnessed the second post-revolution elections. The political party Hizb al-Nahḍah (Renaissance Party), officially founded in 1981, has been having a considerable impact on the political milieu of the region since its political career has experienced a renewed boost. Furthermore, Salafism has emerged as a legitimate force in the country demanding al-Nahḍah to redefine its role and strategy. While in power al-Nahḍah faced multifarious political, social and economic challenges that compelled it to devise new strategies and policies to suit the changing socio-political climate. In addition to exploring post-revolution transitions and transformations in Tunisia, this paper focuses on Hizb al-Nahḍah, the issues and challenges it encountered while in power, and those that lie ahead.

**Keywords:** Tunisia; Arab Spring; Hizb al-Nahḍah; Salafism; governance; elections

Introduction

In late 2010 and early 2011, Tunisia was ignited by political upheaval when Bin Ali, an unchallengeable ruler in power over the previous two decades, was surprisingly ousted. Very rapidly the spark of unrest spread to the other countries of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region to embrace Egypt, Libya, Syria, Yemen, Morocco, Bahrain, etc. (Eyadat 2011, 3). Encompassing most of the MENA region, the ‘Arab Spring’ took each and every country by surprise. Since then, periodic protests have been breaking out, keeping the whole region on edge (Rosiny 2012, 1). Like slow-moving tectonic plates, the longstanding unaddressed political, social and economic issues finally culminated into a climate conducive to the triggering of major upheavals.

The reasons for the causes of these outbreaks ranged from politics, economics, and lack of civic freedom and human rights to dignity. Questions about the lack of political space and freedom of speech, unemployment, the ban on various Islamic practices or the regime’s corrupt nature that led to the materialization of these events are being debated at length. Explanations including the role of youth in these revolutions; the

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role and impact of different social networking sites like Twitter, Facebook and YouTube, and other related popular social media; and the issue of whether these events, as presaged by Tariq Ramadan, were spontaneous or facilitated and sponsored by a third party, have also been evoked (Ramadan 2012, 7–13). To this day, observers, analysts, political theorists, academicians and others are still preoccupied with attempts at explaining the entire phenomenon.

The Arab uprisings – similar to other social uprisings – were long in the making and multiple intertwined reasons and causes were long-smouldering beneath prior to their eruption. Social, political and economic issues left unaddressed contributed inter alia to what was already a grave situation that had long prevailed throughout the MENA region, before they finally culminated in popular mass uprisings (Pollack 2011, 2). The protests that took place in Tunisia acted as a modus operandi for the other countries of the region. The first to follow was Egypt, where the protestors who assembled en masse in the now internationally well-known Tahrir Square (or Liberation Square) shouted slogans such as İsqāt al-Nizām (bring down the regime) (Eyadat and Schaefer 2013, 203). Over time, Libya, Bahrain, Yemen and Syria followed suit (Brynen et al. 2013, 17). Similar protests were witnessed in Oman, Lebanon, Morocco, Jordan and Saudi Arabia as well (Dupont and Passy 2011, 447; Rosiny 2012, 2–3). ‘The tremors,’ wrote Kenneth M. Pollack, that stunned the entire world, ‘can still be felt, and no one is quite certain when the aftershocks will end, or when another shock wave of popular unrest might occur’ (Pollack 2011, 1).

Egypt, however, is still in flux, and has yet to attain stability, as evidenced by the unfolding of the events of which the most permeating was the toppling of Muhammad Mursi from power in July 2013 (The Guardian October 13, 2014) by General ‘Abd al-Fatah al-Sisi. In the face of this precarious situation, predicting the political outcome and future of Egypt is the most difficult task facing all political analysts, observers and commentators alike.

The same is true for the extremely precarious situation in Syria and Libya with routine killings, mass destruction, and indescribable chaos and mayhem now commonplace, particularly in Syria; the impact of which may well extend beyond the borders of both countries. In Libya, ‘the aftermath of the power struggle is the hollow shell of violence that will haunt the state and its citizens for generations to come’ (Eyadat and Schaefer 2013, 203). Eyadat and Schaefer also pointed out that Bashar al-Assad’s clinging to power has resulted in further aggravating the situation with ever-increasing routine violent clashes.

The Arab Spring is now bogged down in Egypt, Syria and Libya, but amid the ensuing chaos, confusion and uncertainty there is hope for Tunisia where a decades-long authoritarian regime was ousted as a result of the popular mass protests held in that country. There now seems to be a wind of change in the political context in Tunisia, where on 26 October 2014 the population witnessed the second post-revolution elections.

Post-revolution Tunisia: transitions and transformations

The ‘uprising’ that began in 17 December 2010 resulted in the lightning ousting of the dictator Bin Ali on 14 January 2011. Since then the country experienced at times surprising but diverse transformations, on both political and social levels. Following Bin Ali’s departure, Tunisia established a ‘temporary’ or ‘transitional’ government to bring
about political transition in the country under the leadership of Muḥammad Ghannūshī, the longest-serving prime minister of Bin Ali’s reign.

Politically the country continued to remain unstable as Muḥammad Ghannūshī defied all calls for him to resign. By hanging on, he galvanized a coalition between leftists, communists, trade unionists, Islamists and human rights activists who continued to hold demonstrations against him and his cabinet (Al-Ahmar, 2011, 6). As the protests intensified, Muḥammad Ghannūshī finally was compelled to step down on 27 February (Arieff 2011, 1; Paciello 2011, 10). Thus, the two post-revolution transitional governments – replete with the personalities from the previous regime – encountered severe mass protests demanding a total break with the earlier elements.

With the departure of Muḥammad Ghannūshī and the establishment of a third transitional government, Baiji Qaid al-Sebsi (an elderly statesman who had rendered services during the rule of Habib Bourguiba) returned to the political arena as prime minister. To a great extent the new transitional government was successful in gaining the support of the masses. Al-Sebsi, in his first appearance as prime minister, vowed to increase personal and political liberty, to legalize the political parties, to improve the economic situation, and ‘to restore the prestige of the state’ (Amara 2011). Among the many achievements of the ‘Tunisian Revolution for Dignity and Freedom’, as the masses were calling it, was the legalization of different political parties including ones that had been previously banned. Consequently, within a very short period of time, a plethora of new parties emerged with the number of legalized parties increasing from nine to more than a hundred (Al-Ahmar 2011, 6). Among them, the most dominant group that emerged in Tunisia’s new political setting was al-Nahdah, which was finally legalized on 3 March 2011, having been previously debarred from functioning legally due to its Islamist nature (McCurdy 2011, 5). It was also subjected to strong state repression in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

In a major development, the transitional government on 3 March 2011 signalled a ‘new transitional road map’, which scheduled that the people of the country would elect their representatives for the National Constituent Assembly on 24 July 2011 (Pickard 2013, 135). The National Constituent Assembly, in addition to nominating the new president and interim government, was tasked with the task of drafting a new constitution. It was clearly a major step in leading the country towards a major political transformation.

**Resurgence of Hīz b al-Nahdah**

For the first time in its history, Tunisia, while witnessing the resurgence of the mass protests, appearance and disappearance of transitional establishments, and legalization of political parties, also experienced what were said to be, free and fair elections on 23 October 2011. The election results attributed the majority of votes to al-Nahdah who won 89 seats out of 217, with 41% of the total vote (Guazzone 2013, 33).

The success of al-Nahdah in the elections demonstrates its ‘resurgence’ and ‘return’ into the country’s political milieu, on the one hand, and its growing popularity, on the other. Many reasons have been posited to explain its victory, including its ‘hierarchical cohesion’ which gives it harmony and its vetoing of any in-house divisions. As a parallel, while other parties were struggling to connect with the masses, al-Nahdah cleverly used masājīd (mosques) as a platform to reach, attract, appeal and gain the support of the wider section of the public (Al-Ahmar 2011, 11–12). Moreover, another reason attributed by Sam Bolier to its success was that al-Nahdah was undoubtedly the
‘best structured’ political force in Tunisia (Bolier 2011). Its leaders, according to Greenway, were ‘true to their values’, were respected and venerated for being honest, for making sacrifices, and for showing firm tenacity throughout against the authoritarian regime (Greenway 2011).

**Hizb al-Nahḍah and the Salafi equation**

The ousting of Bin Ali from office in January 2011 engaged the Tunisian intelligentsia and political leadership in establishing a stable governing system for the country, in addition to materializing the establishment of some brand new political denominations. To the abject surprise for everyone was the vigorous surge of the Salafis in post-revolution Tunisia who were also intensely engaged in making their presence felt in every sphere of life by staging demonstrations, challenging the dress code, advocating the strict implementation of Shari’ah (Islamic law based on the Koran), favouring the segregation of sexes, opposing the selling of alcohol, and rejecting the spread of immorality via cultural festivals and art exhibitions (Maddy-Weitzman 2012, 203).

Hizb al-Nahḍah, officially founded in 1981, made a comeback in its political progress, thereby having a considerable impact on the political climate in the region. The restructuring and reformation of the movement, in addition to devising new strategies and policies suited to the changing socio-political climate, are the key preoccupations of al-Nahḍah. The emergence of Salafism as a new political force obviously required al-Nahḍah to redefine its role, strategy and outlook. This was manifested in its role as a mediator between the different political actors – secularist groups and Salafist groups – which, according to Rāshid al-Ghannūshi, primary ideologue of the movement, is a most difficult and complicated endeavour.

It is against this backdrop along with the abrupt rise of Salafism in the country that al-Nahḍah faces a series of combined challenges from the different sectors of society. Notwithstanding the mounting pressures generated by the reeling economy, the growing influence of Salafism, criticism from the secularists, and the internal divisions within the movement itself, al-Nahḍah finds itself in an awkward position, oscillating between the Salafis, who accuse it of being an enemy of Islam, and the secularists, who criticize it for its leniency in dealing with the Salafis. Moreover, the party – not being ideologically unitary in nature, composed of various strands and internally split – represents a serious issue for which the movement is having to grapple. This is evident from a quote by The International Crisis Group: Tunisia:

> An-Nahḍah itself is divided: between religious preachers and pragmatic politicians as well as between its leadership’s more flexible positions and the core beliefs of its militant base. Politically, such tensions give rise to an acute dilemma: the more the party highlights its religious identity, the more it worries non-Islamists; the more it follows a pragmatic line, the more it alienates its constituency and creates an opening for the Salafis. (International Crisis Group 2013, i–ii)

The party’s president and primary ideologue, Shaykh Rāshid al-Ghannūshi, best explained the entire situation:

> It is true that our development was very fast. We came from 50 countries and 27 prisons, and we organized ourselves in about 9 months […] we organized ourselves and our program and we went to power without real preparation. We committed many mistakes and so we need to rest and contemplate about our experience. (Lang 2014, 12)
In this vein, observers hold that the party is undergoing a process of reorganization and reformation. As a consequence of overall developments in the MENA region, especially in their own country of Tunisia, al-Nahdah’s restructuring, reorganization and change in outlook are reflected in how it has mediated between Salafis and secularists. In the four years of the post-revolution era, the party has been successful in the role of mediation, and will continue to do so in future. According to Nader Hashemi, ‘al-Nahdah is perfectly suited to serve as Tunisia’s mediating group during the country’s democratic transition process’ (Hashemi 2013, 142).

In sum, al-Nahdah, being heavily engaged in defining its policies and strategy anew, has taken a pragmatic approach of far-reaching consequences in dealing with the country’s various polarities. The task of mediation, in addition to being significant, in diffusing escalations is also necessary for Tunisia’s peaceful transition. Stefano Torelli highlights the high significance of al-Nahdah’s mediating role:

This is the most interesting aspect to underline concerning al-Nahdah strategy in the new Tunisian political landscape. What we are witnessing in Tunisia is the capacity of a political party to mediate between different instances. The role that al-Nahdah is playing could be crucial in the new Tunisia where several political and social actors are vying for supremacy. (Torelli, quoting from Hashemi 2013, 142)

Given that various currents exist within the movement, al-Nahdah is by far the best suited to mediating between different polarizations in Tunisia. On the one hand, its political figures such as Râshid al-Ghannûshî, moderate in their approach, help the movement to strengthen ties with the secular forces, and, on the other, the religious figures at the base, such as Sadok Chorou, facilitate a rapprochement with the Salafis.

Hizb al-Nahdah in power (2011–13)

Al-Nahdah dominated the scene when Tunisia went to the polls in October 2011 for the first time after unseating Bin Ali. However, the party, lacking a majority, was not in a position to form the government independently and had no other option but to form a coalition. It was in December that it finally formed an alliance with the other two secular parties: the centrist Congress for the Republic (CPR) and the leftist Ettakatol (Amara 2011; Allani 2012, 133; Cavatorta and Merone 2013, 857; Haynes 2013, 176–177). The tripartite coalition – poles apart ideologically – came to be known as the ‘Troika’. The Troika nominated secretary-general of al-Nahdah, Hammadi al-Jibali, as prime minister, Moncef Marzouki of CPR as president, and Mustafa bin Jafar of Ettakatol as speaker of the National Constituent Assembly (Feuer 2012, 2; Maddy-Weitzman 2012, 200).

This new interim government, under the leadership of Hammadi al-Jibali, was composed of 25 ministers, of which 11 belonged to al-Nahdah, five to Ettakatol, four to Congress for the Republic, and the remaining five to independents (Guazzone 2013, 33). The National Constituent Assembly was charged with drafting a new constitution to clear the path for holding the general or parliamentary elections in the country, as both initiatives were, and still are, highly significant in changing the political landscape of the region.

From the very inception the al-Nahdah-led establishment, whether under the leadership of Hammadi al-Jibali or Ali Lareydh, encountered massive challenges including a dismal economic situation, a worsening security situation, a highly polarized and
polarizing political climate, the issue of the role of Islam and the state, women’s rights, the choice of a parliamentary or a presidential system, and the rise of Salafism (Guazzone 2013, 33). In this regard, El-Khawas wrote:

The new government faced many challenges [from] cooperation among diverse parties to draft a constitution and fix rampant unemployment. The Constituent Assembly, charged with drafting a new constitution, had to wrestle with controversy over sharia [… as the] Salafists […] incessantly] demand[ed] sharia [to] be the source of legislation. […] Another important constitutional issue being debated was the system of government that Tunisia should have. Would it be presidential, parliamentary, or a mix? (El-Khawas 2012, 19–20)

Meanwhile, in respect to these issues, there was massive disagreement within the Troika. Conflict, competition and discord in the post-election phase seemed to be not only within the coalition but also at the broader level. This was due to the fact that throughout the country all the social and political actors who had been united against the apparatus of the old regime, prior to the elections, were now heavily engaged, in one way or another, in ensuring their own legitimacy and supremacy (Guazzone 2013, 35).

The interim government failed, if not completely but to a large extent, to accomplish its plans, especially in the sector of the economy; consequently, it faced severe condemnation from the various sectors of society. The data provided by the World Bank help to illustrate the point. Unemployment, particularly among the educated youth, which was one of the chief factors that had triggered the 2011 revolution, increased and within a period of three years (2011–13) it reached 15.7%; gross domestic product (GDP) growth slowed to 2.7%. The figures are eloquent of the unsatisfactory and dismal performance of the al-Nahdah-led establishment, predominantly in the economic and security sectors. Its leaders admitted that ‘inexperience and lack of expertise contributed to their inability to tackle the country’s security and economic challenges’ (Lang 2014, 11). Lutfi Zaytun, one of the senior leaders of the party, while recognizing the responsibility for the poor performance, remarked: ‘We entered government without any experience. There was also our lack of knowledge with the mechanism of the Tunisian administration’ (11). It was amid growing criticism – fuelled by the murder on 25 July 2013 (BBC World News) of a secular politician, Muhammad Brahmi, as well as increasing unemployment – that Ali Laaephy, who held the office of prime minister, also resigned on 9 January 2014 (Gall 2014a).

Prior to this, Hammadi al-Jibali had also resigned on 19 February 2013, in the wake of a worsening situation, and a deepening crisis following another murder: that of Chokri Belaid, the first political figure in the country (Stepan and Linz 2013, 25).

After the resignation of the prime minister, The New York Times wrote on 9 January 2014 that the country’s labour union, coupled with other political parties, finally agreed on Mehdi Joma to lead the country until general elections were held (Stepan and Linz 2013, 25). What was noteworthy in the whole process, thus far, and as was pointed out by Carlotta Gall, was al-Nahdah’s agreement to accept the demands for a caretaker government, which signified the recognition of its failures, especially in the area of economics. After witnessing the events that unfolded in Egypt and irrespective of rhetoric, it was a pragmatic step, albeit a compromise on the part of al-Nahdah, to avert the risk of popular unrest in the country, and to protect the party from what the Muslim Brotherhood has suffered in Egypt (Gall 2013).

Part of the story reveals that the party compromised because of pressure exerted internally by a polarized political milieu, and externally by the ousting of Egyptian
President Muḥammad Mursī from office in July 2013. A senior leader of the party, ‘Abd al-Mugid al-Naggar, remarked that the situation in Egypt severely affected Tunisia, and particularly al-Nahḍah:

> Once the Egyptian Freedom and Justice Party was forcibly removed from office, those in opposition began to raise their voice against us and we were left with no other option but ‘to make concessions here at the negotiating table in Tunis’. (Lang 2014, 10)

Similar views were expressed by ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ al-Mūrū, second in rank after Rāshid al-Ghannūšī:

> We gave concessions because we found ourselves in an awkward position. We only conceded because of the pressure. And we chose not to confront this pressure with violence of our own, but in a way that had the good of the country in mind.4

Whether al-Nahḍah had compromises under pressure, or accepted to keep in sight what was favourable for Tunisia’s political transition, or made a tactical manoeuvre made in response to an ‘existential threat’ – whatever the case may be – the vital element to note was that it remained stoic in the face of regional political dynamics.

Meanwhile, the National Constituent Assembly resumed office to embark on the most outstanding project of drafting a new constitution. A historic event in its own right, this ambitious endeavour was finally completed on 26 January 2014 (‘Tunisia Passes Progressive Constitution’ 2014), when members of the Assembly voted to approve the constitution. The promulgation of the new constitution, passed with 200 votes, would certainly open new gates for a viable and practical ‘transition’ in the country, and in the restorative process al-Nahḍah’s role would always be central. According to analysts the new constitution, while on one hand being ‘liberal’, recognizes democratic freedom and, on the other, maintains references to the country’s Islamic identity (Gall 2014b).

**The second referendum and the issue of governance**

After months of intense political campaigning by the various political parties, Tunisia, while making history, on 26 October 2014 held its second post-revolution elections. Al-Nahḍah, the most dominant party in the post-Arab uprising era, encountered an unexpected defeat in these elections, with a new political party, Nidaa Tounes, emerging with a coalition of leftist politicians and remnants of Bin Ali’s regime garnering about 85 out of 217 seats. As pointed out by Louis Bonhoure, the victory of the latter largely reveals a massive shift among the voters who felt disappointed and disillusioned with the al-Nahḍah-led government that had failed to produce the desired results on multiple fronts (Bonhoure 2014). With the elections behind them, the key question was about governing the country. Nidaa Tounes, lacking a majority, had to seek the cooperation of other parties, including that of al-Nahḍah, as explained by Mezran and Talverdian (2014). Highlighting the reasons for Islamist and secularist cooperation, they conclude:

[W]ith reports citing Nidaa Tounes officials not explicitly committing to inviting their Ennahda opponents to negotiations. That is, after all, how the game is played. In reality, however, if Nidaa Tounes wishes to demonstrate leadership and governance capabilities – and not just that it can win an election – it will need to find a way to
work with Islamists. This is because, aside from the two major parties, the Tunisian electorate is fragmented into numerous smaller parties that carry little weight and would not have enough pull, even if they all banded together, to rule with the leading party. (Mezran and Talverdian 2014)

Elections and governance are two different battles. Now, with the elections over, the course of Tunisia’s political transition and transformation will largely be contingent upon the current and future role played by the various political and social actors, more importantly, on the degree to which they will be able to cooperate, in order to shape the course of political events in the country. A major apprehension that may derail the outcome of Tunisia’s political transition the fact that current political entities are, on the one hand, still in their infancy, lacking, among others aspects, experience, monetary resources and a clear political programme, and, on the other hand, are antagonistic with one another. Amid a reeling economy and a worsening security situation, it is vital that the various political parties work in tandem to deal with the country’s immense challenges. Failure to do so could derail the country’s political transition. These elections, therefore, are about more than selecting a constituent assembly; rather, they will determine the prospects for a genuine and peaceful transformation taking place in Tunisia.

Conclusions
The popular mobilization in Tunisia and its subsequent spread to the other MENA regions ended its long autocratic rule and heralded the beginning of a new era. In the ensuing four years, the country – amid fear, chaos and confusion, and the unfolding of the events beyond its borders – now seems to be heading towards the path of stability. It is important to mention that al-Nahdah’s pragmatic approach throughout this period was, and continues to be, decisive in ensuring a peaceful transition in the country. Moreover, the ideological polarization that persists in Tunisia requires the need of a ‘mediating group’ to patch up the disparities between the various political and social actors, especially those that prevail between the Salafis and secularists. Despite the criticism levelled at al-Nahdah for its poor and unsatisfactory performance in the spheres of the economy and security, it still has remained successful, to a degree, in bringing stability to the country by taking the pragmatic steps already described. Nonetheless, circumstances demand a more active and vibrant role from al-Nahdah as a mediating group to facilitate the transformation of these conflicting polarities from ‘competitive to cooperative’. It is undeniable that the role of al-Nahdah – a leading political force – in bringing economic prosperity, maintaining a balance between ideologically competing forces, improving the security situation and overseeing peaceful transition is critically significant.

On a broader level, the changing political landscape of the country suggests that al-Nahdah itself is undergoing a transitional phase in which it is heavily engaged in reconciling its in-house differences and elaborating its future strategy. The defeat of al-Nahdah at the hands of al-Sebsi-led party in the recent parliamentary elections in the country suggests that, for al-Nahdah to remain ascendant, it has to play a more dynamic and constructive role at multiple fronts.

Disclosure statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.
Notes
1. While naming these popular uprisings, a difference is observed among the various experts about the term that best describes the 2011 episodes in the MENA region. The terms used range from ‘Arab Spring’; ‘Arab awakening’ ‘Arab uprising’ and ‘Arab revolution’. The choice of term and their related definition and interpretation varies according to the perception and optimism of the analyst. Rami Khouri, for example, argues that the term ‘Arab spring’ underestimates the demands of the demonstrators. He prefers to use the term ‘Arab revolution’ for the reason that ‘revolution’ (Thawrah) is the term used by the demonstrators themselves. For more information see, Rami Khouri, “Spring or Revolution,” Agence Global, 17 August 2011. This paper uses the term ‘Arab Spring’ to refer to the uprisings in the MENA region.
2. Born in November 1954 in Cairo, Abd al-Fatah al-Sisi ousted the elected President Muḥammad Mursi from office. After a period of almost one year, al-Sisi, by winning 96.9% of the vote in the presidential elections, was declared Egypt’s President on 3 June 2014. For more details see, Bradley and Ismail (2014).
3. For more detailed information about the economic situation in post-revolution Tunisia, see World Bank (2014).
4. This is a quotation from an interview with Hardin Lang et al. on December 15, 2013, as quoted in Lang (2014, 9).

References


