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Book review: political Islam in Tunisia the history of Ennahda

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Anne Wolf *Political Islam in Tunisia: The History of Ennahda*, London: Hurst & Co, 2017.

ISBN 9780190670757, 269pp.

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Anne Wolf, a UK-based researcher with a growing reputation as a keen observer of Tunisia, has written a rich and informative history of its main Islamist movement. In six densely-written, detailed chapters, Wolf places Ennahda within the broad context of Tunisian politics, and the country's wider Islamist movement, tracing its antecedents in the nineteenth century. She brings the story up to the present day. Wolf carried out archival research for the more historical parts of the work and conducted numerous interviews with Nahda leaders and activists. The book contains a number of useful appendices containing political documents relating to the movement's key turning points. Wolf has also cast a wide net in the secondary literature on her subject. The result of her meticulous research is a work that will be of sustained usefulness to those interested in Tunisia, Islamism and Middle Eastern politics more generally.

After a foray in Chapter 1 into Tunisia's reformist tradition going back to the late nineteenth century – which, Wolf argues, is linked to Tunisia's Islamist as well as secular heritage – the author turns to the history of what eventually becomes Ennahda, from the 1960s onwards. She traces the evolution and incarnations of the movement, from al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya (the Islamic Group), to MTI (Mouvement de la Tendance Islamique), to Ennahda proper. Particularly pertinent to the movement's origins are the intricate – albeit conflicting - connections to the Muslim Brotherhood and, later, to the Iranian Revolution, which Wolf carefully explores. The figure of Rachid Ghannouchi dominates from the start, and Wolf delves into his ideas and strategies throughout the book, offering many good insights into his leadership.

Wolf outlines the various tensions and splits within the movement through its history, focusing in particular on the breaking away of the Progressive Islamists led by Hmida Ennaifer in the late 1970s and the long-standing tensions between a pragmatic trend, close to Abdelfatah Mourou, and a more dogmatic, scripturalist one led by Salah Karker. Other conflicts – over ideas and strategies, between

generations, between leaders and followers and, in later years, between members in exile and those who remained at home – are also delved into. What emerges is a picture of a complex movement that has always struggled to contain often divergent ideological strands under one umbrella.

The book places Ennahda within the broader context of Tunisia's history and politics. The movement's clash with Habib Bourguiba, the political opening which came with Zine el Abidine Ben Ali's accession to power in 1987, followed by confrontation and repression, go some way towards explaining its ideological evolution. Relations with other opposition parties and the trade union movement, and with civil society, are also crucial aspects of the context in which Ennahda operated and also contributed to its development. Events such as the Gulf war of 1990, the wars in Afghanistan and Algeria, and the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, provide important focal points, illustrating the connections between the Tunisian Islamist movement and the wider Middle Eastern region. The author tracks the effects of the long years of repression and the exile of a great part of Ennahda's leadership and activist body under Ben Ali. Particularly useful are the descriptions of the organisational structures of the movement abroad and the relationship between the internal and external branches.

Wolf's analysis comes into its own in the book's last two chapters. Chapter 5 traces the reconstitution of Ennahda's domestic organisational structures and the links it tried to establish with some secular opposition groups from the mid-2000s. These reformed structures did not necessarily play a role in causing the revolt against Ben Ali but they possibly explain, in large part, Ennahda's relative electoral and political success after his overthrow. The post-2011 story, as told in Chapter 6, has often been told but there are still many useful insights here: the author points out, for example, that Ennahda's rapid loss of popularity was due to the fact that, contrary to appearances up to that point, it could not offer many practical solutions to the socio-economic problems of the country.

Wolf neither condemns nor idealises Ennahda. She offers measured analysis of the two issues which have proven profoundly divisive within Tunisian politics: Ennahda's approach to democracy and the values and principles that must necessarily underpin it (freedom of expression, gender equality, tolerance) and – relatedly – its approach to political violence. Both issues have been long-standing, going back to the 1980s, but became especially pressing in the post-2011 context where Ennahda, having partially assumed the reins of power, was accused of undermining the prospects of democratic transition and pandering to Tunisia's jihadist forces.

Wolf's detailed research (which is, however, occasionally marred by a lack of references) underpins this measured analysis and makes the book a valuable tool for readers interested in particular events or aspects of Ennahda. Paradoxically, this strength may be indirectly connected to the book's major weakness, which is that it does not put forward a major thesis, a 'big idea', about the movement. While not breaking new ground in this latter way, however, the book makes a major contribution towards the scholarly understanding of Ennahda, no mean achievement in this age of ideological and emotive contestation over Islamist politics.