



## ON THE RECORD: Tunisian Nahda Leader Rachid Ghannouchi at The Washington Institute

On November 30, 2011, The Washington Institute hosted a private on-the-record roundtable with Sheikh Rachid Ghannouchi, founder and chairman of Tunisia's Islamist Nahda Party. Nahda won over 40 percent of the votes in Tunisia's October 30 election and will lead the new government in coalition with two smaller, more secular parties. Although Ghannouchi will not serve in a formal political role, [Hamdi al-Jabali](#), the party's secretary-general, is now Tunisia's prime minister.

During this roundtable, Ghannouchi stressed his commitment to democracy and to "coordination" with NATO. At the same time, he reiterated his belief in the legitimacy of Hamas as well as his refusal to commit to an Israeli-Palestinian two-state solution or to renounce the use of violence against Israel. He also warned that Arab monarchs, specifically in Saudi Arabia, would soon face overthrow if they did not "return power to the people." Following are verbatim highlights from a translation of Ghannouchi's opening remarks and the ensuing discussion. Brief editorial commentary appears in italics.

### Remarks: Highlights

- The United States position toward [the previous Tunisian ruler [Zine al-Abidine](#)] Ben Ali was slightly better than that of its European allies. The State Department issued several reports concerning human rights abuses and torture in Tunisia; nevertheless, U.S. policy never went beyond verbal condemnation into, say, political and economic pressures.
- There have been several successful revolutions in the Arab world, as well as those that are on the path to success. Perhaps, the time for the old Arab republics has come to an end -- and next year will be the time for the monarchies to come to an end. The revolutions have made them [Arab monarchs] face tough decisions. Either they recognize that the time for change has come, or this wave will not stop at their borders merely because they are kings. The youth in Saudi Arabia do not see themselves as less deserving for change than their counterparts in Tunisia or Syria.

- The Arab world is one nation, and Arab people have a common culture. What is taking in place in Morocco gives hope that some monarchs might have understood the message of the day, which is bringing power back to the people.
- There are small Islamist groups in Tunisia, such as the Hizb al-Tahrir, that prohibit women's rights and even elections. Nevertheless, they do not represent the electoral base for Nahda. In fact, they did not participate in the election at all.
- I consider the U.S. position toward these revolutions a positive one. It is one factor, among others, that can ease the relationship between Islam and the West after all of the distortion of Islam's image caused by terrorists.
- In relation to the war on terror, I was prohibited from entering the United States for many years even though my movement and I were never listed as a terrorist organization. Because of these revolutions, I am sitting among you now, enjoying your open-mindedness for dialogue, and for that I am thankful to the martyrs of the revolutions and for the positive positions toward these revolutions.

## Discussion: Highlights

**Q:** There are many reasons why you were not allowed into America. Some of them had to do with some of the positions you had adopted over the course of the past twenty years, including referring to America as the Great Satan, supporting Saddam Hussein in swallowing up Kuwait, and supporting violence against Israel. Have these positions changed -- or do you still hold those views?

**A:** Since Nahda was declared as a political movement in 1981, I have never been a supporter of violence. We call for pluralism, and we had relationships with all opposition factions. Concerning the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, this is a complex matter that has not been solved -- neither under Arafat, nor Abu Mazen, nor under Hamas -- even though a majority of Palestinians accepted the idea of a two-state solution. Today, the issue concerns the Palestinians and the Israelis more than anybody else. I am concerned about Tunisia, and I have a model and an experiment that I want to succeed, while others are concerned about Palestine or Libya. Everyone is concerned about their own interests, and mine is Tunisia.

I do not deny that my position has evolved, and I am proud that my position has evolved because I am a human, after all. I have documents to prove that I refused to label the United States as the Great Satan. I rather considered the United States as a nation like all others that makes its own decisions, some good and some bad. I repeatedly refused Ayatollah Khomeini's rhetoric toward the United States when he tried to demonize it. I do not believe in it [Khomeini's rhetoric].

In our Tunisian history, we note that Tunisia was one of the first nations to recognize U.S. independence. We also note the role of the United States in acquiring our own independence.

*[Commentary: In this exchange, Ghannouchi glosses over his many years of documented interviews and declarations vilifying America in very extreme terms such as "Great Satan." See, for example, Ila Filastin, November 1990, as cited in <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=2844>.*

*Ghannouchi also evades the issue of his repeated endorsements of violence against Israel, including a February 2009 recorded interview in which he praises the launching by Hamas of Qassam rockets to "terrorize" Israeli civilians -- an interview that was officially censured by Britain's public media commission. See <http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/enforcement/broadcast-bulletins/obb143/> In addition, he offers no comment on his past support for the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, which he praised as the "joining together two Arab states out of twenty-two, praise be to God." (See Ila Filastin, November 1990, *op. cit.*) At the same time, he states that his position has now evolved, in some undefined way.*

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Q: You referred a moment ago to the Tunisian model; does this model connect to the idea of creating the sixth caliphate, as one of your colleagues declared recently?

A: Thank you for giving me the opportunity to clarify some issues, because people cannot be friends unless they wipe away the fog from their relationships. Mr. al-Jabali, the secretary-general of Nahda, was not talking about the political system that he wants Tunisia to adopt, because our stance on the political system for Tunisia is clearly stated in our electoral platform. He certainly knows that he wants to be the prime minister of Tunisia and not the prime minister of the Ottoman caliphate. Even Erdogan is not a caliph. What Jabali was talking about, instead, is political morality -- in other words, the moral and ethical characteristics of any ruler. He referred [as a model] to the first five caliphs who ruled the Muslim world during its golden era.

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Q: The U.S. ambassador in Tunis recently opined that Tunisia under Nahda will be less like Hamas than like NATO ally Turkey. Can America expect that Tunisia under Nahda will be like a NATO partner?

A: Tunisia now has coordination committees with NATO on many levels, and there is no intention to end it. Further, Tunisia has free trade agreements with the EU, which composes a large part of NATO.

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Q: What is your plan for domestic reforms? In what ways will it be Islamic?

A: We will focus primarily on developing the interior in order to bridge the disparity between the rich coastal and the inland regions. But we do not have any intention of imposing Islam on the Tunisian people -- not in what they eat, or drink, or wear, or believe.

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Q: The media has suggested that Tunisia's new constitution will include an article banning relations with Israel or Zionists. Is this accurate?

A. There is no mention of cutting off the possibility of relations with Israel in our platform. What happened [in the transitional Ben Achour commission after the Tunisian revolution] was a political document signed by opposition political parties [including Nahda]. But the constitution should deal only with long-term policies that affect Tunisia, and the Israeli-Arab conflict is not one of them. Today there is no party, neither Nahda nor any of the others, that proposes to put such a provision in the new constitution. The constitution is not written yet, and the only country that will be mentioned in it is Tunisia.

*[Comment: In fact, Nahda's platform committed the party "to struggle for the liberation of Palestine and consider it as a central mission and a duty required by the need to challenge the Zionist colonial attack." The platform also refers to Israel as "an alien entity planted in the heart of the homeland, which constitutes an obstacle to unity and reflects the image of the conflict between our civilization and its enemies. Ghannouchi did not rule out this being either policy or enshrined in law , just not something that would be found in Tunisia's new constitution. See <http://presstv.com/detail/199276.html>.]*

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Q: You said that a majority of Palestinians accept the idea of a two-state solution with Israel. What about you and your party? Do you accept that concept?

A: Tunisia will never try to take the place of either of the two Palestinian organizations in deciding about these issues.

*[Comment: Ghannouchi not only equates Hamas with the Palestinian Authority, but also clearly refuses to explicitly accept a two-state solution for the Arab-Israeli conflict. This is in line with his published interview in February 2011, on the occasion of his most recent visit to Qatar's pro-Hamas Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, whom he cited later in the Q&A as his superior in the International Organization of Muslim Ulama [scholars]. In that interview, Ghannouchi declares that while Hamas founder Sheikh Ahmed Yassin prophesied that Israel would be eliminated by 2027, his own view is that Israel could be eliminated even before that date. See*

<http://www.alarab.com.qa/details.php?docId=185944&issueNo=1181&secId=28> and

<http://www.rightsidenews.com/2011112014978/world/terrorism/tunisian-pledges-a-new-caliphate.html>.]

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Q: There is a record of your referring to the Hamas government in Gaza as a model of democracy. Do you still believe that?

A: I do not remember making such comments about Hamas. But what cannot be denied is that Hamas was democratically elected, and so it is a legitimate government.

*[Comment: For Ghannouchi's praise of Hamas "democracy" in Gaza, see*

<http://www.militantislammonitor.org/article/id/5107> and [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vJ4\\_pNibf3](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vJ4_pNibf3).]

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Q: Governing involves making choices, so what is your view in case of a contradiction between Islam and democracy or human rights? For example, Tunisia is a signatory to the UN's Universal Declaration on Human Rights, which includes the right to change one's religion. Yet Islam is opposed to that principle. How do you reconcile such contradictions?

A: My own view, which I have written about many times over the years, is that each person should be free to enter into a religion, to stay in a religion, or to leave a religion. And gradually some other leading sheikhs, one in Egypt and Sheikh [Yusuf al-] Qaradawi [in Qatar] to a certain extent, have moved toward this view. I am Qaradawi's deputy in the International Association of Muslim Scholars, and I have discussed this issue with him.

*[Ghannouchi's relatively moderate personal views on this question are indeed a matter of record. But so is his deference to Qaradawi, the virulently anti-American, pro-Hamas, and anti-Israeli cleric made famous by Aljazeera. Ghannouchi noted later in his reply that he has not agreed to "decriminalize" apostasy from Islam.]*

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