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## Regional Security Governance, Audience Expectations and Foreign Policy Roles: North Africa's Demand that Tunisia Maintains Its "Strategic Distance"\*\*\*

### حوكمة الأمن الإقليمي وتوقعات الجمهور وأدوار السياسة الخارجية: شمال أفريقيا ومطلبها أن تحافظ تونس على "نأيها الاستراتيجي"

**Abstract:** This study explains change in Tunisian foreign policy in the decade following the 2010 revolts. It contributes to Role Theory by explaining how regional audience expectations are powerful determinants of foreign policy roles. First, the article demonstrates how regional states came to expect Tunisia to follow a specific foreign policy role. Second, it explains how these expectations conditioned role enactment. The article shows how Tunisia developed and established a foreign policy posture of strategic distance, defined by non-partisanship in regional conflicts, adherence to legalism, and pursuit of economic interest. Strategic distance came to be expected by North African states that in turn, pushed Tunisia to maintain it.

**Keywords:** Tunisian Foreign Policy; Strategic Distance; North African States; Role Theory.

**الملخص:** تتناول هذه الدراسة السياسة الخارجية التونسية في العقد الذي تلا الانتفاضات الشعبية عام 2010، وتسهم في نظرية الدور عن طريق تفسير كيفية تأثير توقعات الجمهور الإقليمي في أدوار السياسة الخارجية. وتوضح كيف أنّ دول المنطقة باتت تتوقع من تونس أن تنتهج سياسة خارجية معينة، ثمّ تشرح كيف تحدد هذه التوقعات هذا الدور. وتبيّن كيف طوّرت تونس موقفاً في السياسة الخارجية، ثمّ عمّقت، وهو متمثّل في نأي استراتيجي يتميّز بالحياد في النزاعات الإقليمية، والالتزام بالشرعية، والسعي لتحقيق المصالح الاقتصادية. لقد أصبح النأي الاستراتيجي بالنسبة إلى تونس أمراً متوقعاً من دول شمال أفريقيا، والتي بدورها دفعت تونس إلى الحفاظ عليه.

**كلمات مفتاحية:** سياسة تونس الخارجية؛ النأي الاستراتيجي؛ دول شمال أفريقيا؛ نظرية الدور.

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## Introduction

In the decade after independence, Tunisian political élites consolidated a posture of strategic distance vis-à-vis North Africa,<sup>1</sup> making the country's foreign policy distinctly non-partisan, adhering to legalism, and striving for economic attractiveness. Its engaged "audience" of North African states helped consolidate this strategic distance, which meant that Tunisia did not oppose them in the region's turbulent politics, even if it does not agree with them. Despite regime change in 1987, this strategic distance was upheld by national élites until the 2010 revolts.

The 2010 revolt in Tunisia introduced new actors to Tunisia's political system, some of whom, especially Ennahda, abandoned strategic distance and pursued ideologically driven interventionism. Tunisia's abandonment of strategic distance did not go unnoticed. North African states, despite their own rivalries and preoccupations with pressing domestic concerns, converged around pushing Tunisia back towards strategic distance. Eventually, Tunisian domestic parties – including Ennahda that had opted to abandon strategic distance – came to accept the need to meet regional expectations, despite contrary preferences dictated by ideological worldviews. Regional expectations therefore overpowered ideological commitments, leadership worldviews, and inclinations towards democratization (that would welcomed diversity in perspectives on regional security issues, for example).

We explain abandonment of and reversion to strategic distance with insights from Role Theory (RT) by expanding on how regional audience expectations impact a state's understanding and pursuit of a foreign policy role. RT allows us to bring out co-constitutive exchanges among agents (leadership framing and pursuit of role) and structure (regional expectations), to explain Tunisia's strategy.<sup>2</sup> The argument unfolds in four steps. First, we present our RT-based framework, and then position our argument within studies on Tunisian foreign policy. Second, we present the process of Tunisia's leadership abandoning strategic distance. Third, we analyse how Tunisia's North African audience reacted to its abandonment of its "achieved" role.<sup>3</sup> Fourth, we explain how audience pressures reverted Tunisia to strategic distance.

## Tunisian Foreign Policy and Role Theory

Around 1970, a generally non-confrontational and peace-seeking Tunisia developed a distinct foreign policy posture towards North Africa that we term as "strategic distance" pillared on three main objectives: 1) to maintain a legalistic and neutral posture centred on non-intervention; 2) to take no partisan alignments; and 3) to concentrate on protecting economic interests. Existing literature concurs with our assessment of strategic distance, referencing the notion of Tunisia having a "zero enemy" foreign policy.<sup>4</sup> Zero enemy was designed to allow Tunisia to secure regional economic opportunities and assert a "progressive" internationalist orientation (i.e., a US ally during the Cold War), while remaining true to its post-colonial rejection of external hegemony.<sup>5</sup>

1 We use North Africa following the African Union definition to mean the system composed of Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Tunisia, and the Western Sahara.

2 Sebastian Harnisch, "Role Theory: Operationalization of Key Concepts," in: Sebastian Harnisch, Cornelia Frank & Hanns W. Maull (eds.), *Role Theory in International Relations* (London: Routledge, 2011); Cameron G. Thies, "State Socialization and Structural Realism," *Security Studies*, vol. 19, no. 4 (2010), pp. 689-717.

3 In rational and cognitive designs, the modes of role change have often been distinguished by their causal origin: whether roles are "ascribed" by society or others or "achieved" by the beholder. Quoted in: Harnisch, Frank & Maull (eds.), p. 7.

4 Nicole Grimaud, *La Tunisie à la recherche de sa sécurité* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1995); Youssef Cherif, "Tunisia's Foreign Policy: A Delicate Balance," Atlantic Council, 23 March 2015, accessed on 10/1/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3GC1ZX1>

5 Sophie Bessis & Souhayr Belhassen, *Bourguiba* (Tunisia: Elyzad, 2012).

A dominant approach explains Tunisian foreign policy as the outcome of being a small state needing to protect itself.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the Tunisian army – relative to other armies in the region – has been weak and poorly equipped, making it almost impossible for the country to fight wars. This enfeeblement of the military has been a central governance feature since Habib Bourguiba, as a coup-proofing strategy.<sup>7</sup> Some explanations emphasize the lasting influence of Bourguiba, who crafted the zero enemy foreign policy;<sup>8</sup> while others frame the foreign policy of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali as a continuation of Bourguiba's.<sup>9</sup> In these, the role of the leader is amplified by the exclusionary political system. We think these are empirically valid explanations, despite being inadequate.

Importance of size cannot be dismissed; that Tunisia is surrounded by stronger neighbours must mean that some of its predicaments certainly stem from this reality and demand foreign policy stability and caution, even if North Africa was not volatile. The ongoing conflicts in North Africa, especially between Algeria and Morocco, and Libyan intervention during the reign of Muammar al-Qaddafi have prompted Tunisia to occasionally move away from potential threats to its stability. Moreover, the role of the individual leader must factor in idiosyncrasies; the 1987 "constitutional coup" changed leaders from Bourguiba to Ben Ali without any discernible influence on strategic distance. The pressures of being a small state or leadership idiosyncrasies cannot sufficiently account for the remarkable stability in Tunisian foreign policy.<sup>10</sup>

In addition, subsequent leaderships seem to have embraced strategic distance and been convinced of its importance, reflecting the intersecting significance of policy-making agents and the influence of the regional structure. Consider how around the period of Tunisia's 1987 coup, the regional context was of great importance: Algeria was slowly entering its Black Decade and Libya was falling under an international embargo. The two powerful North African neighbours had their powers curtailed and the Tunisian leadership was less worried than in previous decades. The "neutral" foreign policy could be maintained, and the Tunisians were in a comfortable position because of that.<sup>11</sup> An approach which focuses on regional pressures is often missing in studies on North Africa, and this is what our article explicitly interrogates.

It is also important to draw attention to the importance of the regional level. The period when Tunisia gave up and then reverted back to strategic distance towards North Africa from 2011 to 2014 attracted much analysis. This is because this change represented a deviation from the norm in Tunisia's stable post-independence foreign policy trajectory. Relatedly, various factors have been posited to explain Tunisian foreign policy since after 2011, especially when the reverberations of the revolt/shock opened the door for actors within and without the country to try and influence politics. Studies have explored the role of Gulf states, France, and the US in supporting or financing opposition parties

6 Emma C. Murphy, "The Foreign Policy of Tunisia," in: Raymond Hinnebusch & Anoushiravan Ehteshami (eds.), *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States* (Boulder: CO: Lynne Rienner, 2002), p. 247.

7 Hicham Bou Nassif, "Generals and Autocrats: How Coup-Proofing Predetermined the Military Elite's Behavior in the Arab Spring," *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 130, no. 2 (2015), pp. 245 - 275.

8 Sadri Khiari & Olfa Lamloum, "Le zaïm et l'artisan ou De Bourguiba à Ben Ali," *Annuaire de l'Afrique du Nord*, vol. 37 (1998), pp. 377 - 395.

9 Michel Camau & Vincent Geisser (eds.), *Habib Bourguiba: la trace et l'héritage* (Paris: Karthala, 2004).

10 Mohamed Ben Ahmed, *Les Trois Décennies de Politique Etrangère du Président Bourguiba* (Tunis: Centre de publication universitaire, 2019). We do not aim to explore the pre-independence period, but it is worth mentioning that Tunisia's armed forces have historically been weak in comparison with regional peers. For example, Algeria was always threatening Tunisia with invasion in the 19th century. Even in the early 20th century, an indicator of differences in capabilities was, for example, the means available to the Tunisian resistance compared to those that the Algerians used against France or the Libyans against Italy.

11 Abdelaziz Chneguir, *La politique étrangère de la Tunisie: 1956 - 1987* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2004).

inside Tunisia, while other studies have shed light on Tunisian governments' interest in alleviating Tunisia's international debt problem.<sup>12</sup>

We contend that the interesting aspect of Tunisia's change in foreign policy relates to the circumstances in which strategic distance was abandoned and then restored when Ennahda was the leading party in the Troika coalition that ruled the country from 2011 to 2014. Ennahda pioneered the move away from the strategic distance role, and it was still in power during the restoration of the strategic distance in 2014. Hence, regardless of the debate around "if and how" the positions of Ghannouchi and the party represented the "actual" positions of the Tunisian state, the reality is that Ennahda was in power as part of the Troika.

This article concerns the apparent turbulence in foreign policy in light of continued and largely stable internal conditions. This phenomenon has received little analytical attention. We believe that regional factors can enhance our understanding of the Tunisian case. Our case selection dialogues with research that anchors foreign policy concerns of states within their region, as the context that matters most and in different ways.<sup>13</sup> We are supported in our exploration by recent work on North African foreign policy making, and especially calls for closer interrogation of how regional factors matter.<sup>14</sup> We also build on recent contributions that introduced regional rivalries as determinants of Tunisian foreign policy.<sup>15</sup> We bring these literatures together to help explain how interventions by states in a given region aggregate to stable practices and rules that give the semblance of regional security governance. In sum, our study provides theoretical and empirical support for research that valorises regional factors in explaining security policies.

Using RT as a theoretical framework allows an analysis of regional and internal influences.<sup>16</sup> RT, influenced by sociology and the principles of positivism, is concerned with the study of structures and institutions, while epistemological approaches and foreign policy analysis tend to focus on individual influence.<sup>17</sup> In sum, RT seamlessly integrates explanations that focus on the identities of actors during their interactions with their neighbourhood.<sup>18</sup> This study explains how regional states create expectations as audiences, how they are tracked or extrapolated, and how to drive expectations of regional audiences by pressuring states to adopt external positions tailored to audience size. As such, we highlight structural regional influences and changes in the identities and perceptions of foreign policy decision-makers as well, albeit in less detail.

12 Irene Fernández-Molina, "Modelling for a Living: Two-level Games and Rhetorical Action in the Foreign Debt Negotiations of Post-revolutionary Tunisia," *The Journal of North African Studies*, vol. 24, no. 3 (2019), pp. 376-400; Michael Ayari, "Tunisie, 2011-2020: La démocratie contre l'efficacité de l'action publique?," *Politique Étrangère*, no. 1 (2020), pp. 189-199, 234.

13 Tom Long, "It's Not the Size, It's the Relationship: From 'Small States' to Asymmetry," *International Politics*, vol. 54, no. 2 (2017), pp. 144 - 160.

14 Peter J. Schraeder et al., "Revolutionary Diplomats? Introduction to the Study of North African Foreign Policies Within the Context of the Arab Spring," *The Journal of North African Studies*, vol. 24, no. 4 (2019), pp. 540-557; Irene Fernández-Molina, Laura Feliu & Miguel Hernando de Larramendi, "The 'Subaltern' Foreign Policies of North African Countries: Old and New Responses to Economic Dependence, Regional Insecurity and Domestic Political Change," *The Journal of North African Studies*, vol. 24 no. 3 (2019), pp. 356 - 375.

15 Imad Mansour, "Explaining the Influence of Maghrebi Rivalries on Tunisian Foreign Policy," *The Journal of North African Studies*, vol. 27, no. 2 (2022), pp. 394 - 422.

16 Kalevi J. Holsti, "National Role Conceptions in the Study of Foreign Policy," *International Studies Quarterly*, vol. 14, no. 3 (1970), pp. 233 - 309.

17 Cameron Thies & Marijke Breuning, "Integrating Foreign Policy Analysis and International Relations Through Role Theory," *Foreign Policy Analysis*, vol. 8, no. 1 (2012), pp. 1 - 4.

18 Marijke Breuning, "Role Theory Research in International Relations: State of the Art and Blind Spots," in: Harnisch, Frank & W. Maull (eds.).

RT reconciles these two sets of influences, recognizing that socialization is necessarily a domestic and external process, and in which roles get *enacted*.<sup>19</sup> In studying socialization, we expand on how regional audience states develop expectations and how they pursue them. We show how North African states structured Tunisian foreign policy and thus interacted with domestic processes. Structuring effects on agents are when "the occupant of a position is expected to perform certain acts (and not others) and is expected to perform those acts in specific ways at the proper time and place. Role enactment is thus constrained by the expectations of other individuals."<sup>20</sup> We aim to identify audience preferences and their coercion of others to accept prescribed roles.

Moreover, RT helps us explain how a "policy window" is a condition for policy change.<sup>21</sup> When windows become available as opportunities to produce policy changes, decision makers might or might not jump through such windows, leaving the type and extent of change to be a matter for empirical interrogation. Thus, for abandonment of strategic distance, we provide evidence from Tunisian foreign policy between 2010 and 2014. A policy window came about because of three factors: the legalization of Ennahda and its political participation; its leadership's willingness to enact policy change; and its perception of its allies as being under threat, thus requiring its intervention. In reverting to strategic distance, we explain why Tunisia's audience expectations converged: although North African states had different preferences that had to be reconciled, some wanting a restrained role for Tunisia while others wanting the "threat" eliminated more aggressively, all converged on constraining Tunisia's departure from strategic distance. The Tunisian case allows us to expand on the notion of uniformity among audiences in realizing expectations, and we demonstrate the theoretical claim that audience expectations can be thought of as a system that "punishes" – albeit in difficult-to-specify time frames – "deviant" states.<sup>22</sup>

Finally, we study Tunisian foreign policy in the decade after the 2010 revolt as this decade nests the only break in Tunisia's strategic distance. Within this time frame, we focus analysis on the abandonment of and reversion to strategic distance (i.e., around 2011-2014), and we monitor foreign policy until the end of the decade to check for any act mirroring abandonment. We conclude with a note on the domestic political crisis of 2020 - 2021. Here, persistent with our analysis of audience reactions and expectations, we show how North African states have been closely observing the unfolding Tunisian domestic crisis. This "audience" has lent support to the president of Tunisia in his confrontation with Ghannouchi – both figures representing broader societal and ideational trends.

## Tunisia's Strategic Distance as an Achieved Foreign Policy Role

Tunisia's independence came at a moment of regional instability. Despite commonalities in the societies of North Africa, political competition among élites, as well as violent legacies of colonial control, polarized relations. Initially, Tunisia's élites, under the leadership of Habib Bourguiba, saw potential in harvesting regional societal similarities. Soon after, however, it became clear that political differences were unbridgeable.<sup>23</sup> Thus, by the late 1960s the same Tunisian political élite laboured to institute a

19 Cameron G. Thies, "International Socialization Processes vs. Israeli National Role Conceptions: Can Role Theory Integrate IR Theory and Foreign Policy Analysis?," *Foreign Policy Analysis*, vol. 8, no. 1 (2012), pp. 25 - 46.

20 Cameron G. Thies, *The United States, Israel, and the Search for International Order: Socializing States* (New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 33.

21 Marijke Breuning, "Role Theory in Foreign Policy," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics* (2017); Jakob Gustavsson, "How Should we Study Foreign Policy Change?," *Cooperation and Conflict*, vol. 34, no. 1 (1999), pp. 73 - 95.

22 Cameron G. Thies, "Sense and Sensibility in the Study of State Socialisation: A Reply to Kai Alderson," *Review of International Studies*, vol. 29 (2003), p. 548.

23 Habib Bourguiba, "Nationalism: Antidote to Communism," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 35, no. 4 (1957), pp. 646 - 654.



foreign policy of strategic distance which developed in increments and was consolidated by around 1970. While Bourguiba was the dominant political figure which set the contours of strategic distance,<sup>24</sup> this posture demonstrated its necessity to a predominant set of policy élites who converged around it as a feasible way to react to the regional environment.<sup>25</sup> Strategic distance had three distinct pillars: economic attractiveness, political non-partisanship, and commitment to legality.

Tunisia's economic attractiveness was rooted in its educated and skilled labour force that migrated in search of work, for example to oil-rich Libya (as well as to the Gulf). This had been the case since the 1970s with the significant exploitation of hydrocarbons, and ensuing demand for labour.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, a traditionally key economy activity is the textile manufacturing sector which is a major employer as well as a source of foreign revenue. This strategic sector attracts significant investments (since the 1970s), especially from European sources to which most of the output is exported. Sustaining this key employment activity has faced serious challenges from globalization and the relocation potential of capital in search of more favourable deals, especially with the increased opportunities from competing Global South economies.<sup>27</sup> Sustaining the textile sector in Tunisia has effectively meant maintaining active engagement with European markets and capital. Hence, strategic distance was integral to remain attractive for investment, and to brand its labour force as non-politicized.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly is tourism, Tunisia's other strategic financial and employment resource that attracted the region's middle class, especially from Libya and Algeria. Both economic activities relied heavily on intra-regional mobility, hence Tunisia's leadership sought to reduce the country's vulnerabilities by choosing foreign policies that made it as predictable and non-provocative as possible.<sup>28</sup> By marketing itself as an open and liberal space providing a "Western" tourism experience, Tunisia sought to make itself crucial to other regional states and the region's tourism hotspot. Thereby, Tunisia ensured that regional states had vested interests in its stability, precisely through the maintenance of strategic distance.

Political non-partisanship developed in reaction to regional political outbidding and conflicts especially of the 1960s. North Africa was confronting the violence of colonial legacies, had witnessed open interstate warfare (e.g., the Sands War), and was the theatre of a series of short-lived attempts of unification. Tunisian foreign policy was primarily concerned with avoiding North Africa's rivalries and militarized disputes, and non-partisanship allowed it to be as marginal as possible in active conflicts, even when it was caught up directly in them.<sup>29</sup> For instance, in 1974, Libya proposed a union with Tunisia, which led to the signing of the Treaty of Djerba and the creation of the Arab Islamic Republic; a short-lived experience. It later surfaced that Tunisia had agreed to this union to pull the regional states together, neutralize regional rivalries, and facilitate labour mobility and remittance transfers, and

24 Leslie E. Wehner & Cameron Thies, "Leader Influence in Role Selection Choices: Fulfilling Role Theory's Potential for Foreign Policy Analysis," *International Studies Review*, vol. 23, no. 4 (2021); Cameron Thies & Marijke Breuning, "Integrating Foreign Policy Analysis and International Relations Through Role Theory," *Foreign Policy Analysis*, vol. 8, no. 1 (2012), pp. 1 - 4.

25 Imad Mansour, "Explaining the Influence of Maghrebi Rivalries," in: Thies, *The United States, Israel*, pp. 32-41; Breuning, "Role Theory Research in International Relations," pp. 23 - 26.

26 Hakmi Bou Hafis, "al-Isłāhāt wa-l-Numuw al-Iqtisādī fī Shamāl Afriqiyā," *Majallat Iqtisadiyyat Shamāl Afriqia - Journal of North African Economies*, no. 7 (2009), p. 16.

27 Alistair R. Anderson, Sana El Harbi & Meriem Brahem, "The Tunisian textile industry: local responses to internationalization," *European Journal of International Management*, vol. 6, no. 5 (2012), pp. 525 - 541.

28 Rosita Di Peri, "An Enduring 'Touristic Miracle' in Tunisia?," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 42, no. 1 (2015), pp. 104 - 118.

29 At certain moments, Tunisia can be thought of as having been in a rivalry with Libya; however, it was not unlike other regional states, given Libya's highly provocative behaviors. See: Yahia H. Zoubir & Louisa Dris-Ait-Hamadouche, *Global Security Watch: The Maghreb: Algeria, Libya, Morocco, and Tunisia* (California: Praeger, 2013).

counter crime measures, not to aid in Libya's rallying against other regional states. North African states welcomed Tunisia's decision to withdraw from the union, hence confirming how strategic distance benefited North African states. In turn, Tunisia rejected the dissolution of its sovereignty through Libya's mercurial politics and remained steadfast in its rejection of unions that would polarize the region for years to come, even enduring the wrath of Qaddafi when he deported Tunisian workers in 1985 as a sign of his rejection of Tunisian foreign policy.<sup>30</sup>

Algeria did not approve of the union between Tunisia and Libya and preferred a neutral Tunisia. Algeria, as a dominant North African state in rivalry with Morocco, did not want the formation of a potential working alliance next door. However, from Tunisia's perspective, the Libyan -orchestrated military operation in Gafsa in January 1980 was a strong indication that regional rivalling states would go to great lengths to destabilize each other, including changing their alliance stance.<sup>31</sup> Such realities confirmed for Tunisia's leadership the need for strategic distance. Importantly, reaffirming political non-partisanship during stresses allowed Tunisian governments to signal to all regional states that Tunisian decisions were not part of any calculus intended to build alliances or form blocs, but rather were designed to identify collective solutions to common problems, especially inflows of weapons, militants, and radical ideologies.<sup>32</sup>

Tunisia's commitment to legalism, in the form of its unwavering support for international law and international institutions, emerged from an interest to shield itself from regional conflict and to contribute to regional governance. In one demonstration of this driver, Tunisia warmly welcomed the construction of the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU) as a regional project with a goal to sediment institutional and legal practices in regional relations. Tunisia's position reflects how it had internalized a global convergence around institutional mechanisms – rather than rivalries or conflict-driven alliances – as means to resolve conflicts and build regional order.<sup>33</sup> RT is instructive in explaining this behaviour, as it emphasizes that socialization requires domestic actors to accept the models put forth by other states. To be sure, the argument here concerns a global consensus around channelling conflict management and resolution practices to international bodies such as the United Nations (UN), whereby institutional mechanisms have come to be promoted as appropriate for regional governance.<sup>34</sup> Thus, Tunisia's mirroring such policies without even being prompted to do so demonstrates implicit socialization.

Moreover, unwavering commitment to international legal standards was Tunisia's buffer against competing regional states. For example, in the Western Sahara conflict, Tunisia was inclined towards neutrality, adhered to UN arbitration on issues of Sahrawi self-determination, and supported the expansion of AMU to resolve the conflict. Unwavering support for international law sometimes played against Tunisia's own interests, but the benefits far outweighed the drawbacks. For instance, in its 1982 disagreement with Libya over rights to oil located on the continental shelf, Tunisia turned

30 See the rich memoir of Tahar Belkhdja: Tahar Belkhdja, *Les trois décennies Bourguiba*, 3rd ed. (Paris: Arcantères Publisud, 2010).

31 The Gafsa military operation was orchestrated by Libya's Qaddafi in retaliation to the Tunisia's Bourguiba freezing the Treaty of Djerba pending a popular referendum (which never happened). A referendum was never conducted. Arguably, the plan was for Libyan-supported forces from Tunisia to create a state of unrest and instability inside Tunisia, thereby opening the door for broader external intervention. Algeria is often noted to have a role in the operation, especially by facilitating the movement across its territories of the Libyan-supported Tunisian forces. However, there are doubts that the Algerian president approved this facilitation, with some sources citing "non-conformist" Algerian generals as implicated. See: "Rashīd Khashāna: Arba 'ūn 'Āman 'Alā 'Amaliyyat Gafṣa al-Lafī Aḍā," *Leaders*, 24/4/2020, accessed on 2/7/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/461xvwx>

32 Mohamed A. El-Khawas, "Revolutionary Islam in North Africa: Challenges and Responses," *Africa Today*, vol. 43, no. 4 (1996), pp. 385 - 404.

33 Hédi Baccouche, *En toute franchise* (Tunis: Sud Editions, 2018).

34 For example, Tunisia's commitment to bind itself to legal arbitration emerging from international institutions (e.g., regarding labor regulations) was partly designed to achieve its economic goals noted above. See: Michael J. Willis, *Politics and Power in the Maghreb* (London: Hurst, 2012).

to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) for arbitration. When the decision came down in Libya's favour, Tunisia accepted the ruling without reservation and ceded territory to Libya.<sup>35</sup> Context here is important: Tunisia was facing major internal problems as a result of Bourguiba's *fin de règne*, while Libya was active on multiple fronts such as supporting international terrorism and threatening actors that disagree with it. Tunisia had to accept the ruling because the alternative would have been to provoke Qaddafi's wrath when the country was at its weakest. However, in that moment Tunisia emphasized that its legalist position was not an anomaly to its overall foreign policy, but a direct consequence of it; even when the odds were against it, Tunisia resorted to the ICJ to frame its policy decision.<sup>36</sup> This move showcased how alignment with international legal regimes was necessary because it provided a consistent standard against which regional actors could measure Tunisia's actions: so long as it supported international law across the board, Tunisia was not seen to favour any one party.

In explaining strategic distance through an RT frame, we are focusing on relations with the North African audience. Here, we are not aiming to explain broader policies such as Tunisia's support for the US in Vietnam, hostility towards Egypt's Nasser and Jordan's Hussein in the 1950s and 1960s, its hosting of the Palestinians when they were expelled from Lebanon, its support for Saddam Hussein during the Gulf War, and others. As noted, we are interested in relations with the immediate neighbourhood, with which Tunisia maintained strategic distance for decades.<sup>37</sup> Tunisia's abandonment of strategic distance and its shift to an interventionist foreign policy driven by ideological conviction was enabled by expansive domestic political change following the 2010 revolt, which jolted the political system.

## Tunisian Abandonment of Strategic Distance

After the 2010 revolt, Tunisia did depart from strategic distance in favour of political alignment, with the glaring example being the relationship with Qatar and Turkey. From Ennahda's perspective, such a foreign policy move was undergirded by ideological compatibility and shared religious beliefs; the political space after 2011 created the conditions of possibility for such a departure from strategic distance. Formerly an illegal party, Ennahda after 2010 emerged as a genuine political viability, capable of galvanizing a broad-based national support. Its constituents' shared embrace of political Islam reflected a current that swept well beyond the state's borders and found receptive pockets throughout the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). The absorption of newly politicized constituents around pan-Islamic ideas empowered Ennahda, which in turn imprinted these ideas directly on the political system. The constitution of 2014 emphasized "[The] teachings of Islam and... universal human rights. Inspired by [their] cultural heritage accumulated throughout [their] history... and based on the elements of our Arab-Muslim identity" and the consolidation of "[their] cultural and civilizational belonging to the Arab and Muslim nation... In order to support the Maghreb Union... towards achieving complementarity between Muslim peoples and African peoples"<sup>38</sup> as the basis of the Tunisian state.

35 International Court of Justice, "Continental Shelf (Tunisia/Libyan Arab Jamahiriya)," 1982, accessed on 5/2/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3JDM2S1>

36 For statement by Tunisia on the ruling, see: Cour Internationale De Justice, Recueil des arrêts, avis consultatifs et ordonnances, *Affaire du Plateau continental (Tunisie/ Jamahiriya arabe libyenn)*, Arrêt du 24 fevrier 1982, accessed on 4/2/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3JGsd1l>, (especially p. 39 which shows Tunisia requesting that the IJC determines enforcement procedures). See also: Cour Internationale De Justice, *Correspondance*, "Réponse aux questions" de S. Exc. M. de Lacharrière, Vice-Fräsident de la Cour internationale de Justice (1985)," accessed on 4/2/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3HCQJed> (especially p. 290 which shows continued commitment to ICJ arbitration in correspondence by Tunisian government representative).

37 Mansour, "Explaining the Influence of Maghrebi Rivalries."

38 Preamble to the 2014 Tunisian Constitution, see: "Constitution de La République Tunisienne," Tunis le 26 Janvier 2014, Al bawsala, accessed on 2/4/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3XqtyrI>



Though the initial post-independence constitution identified Tunisia as a sovereign state committed to, among other precepts, "[The] teachings of Islam, [and] the unity of the Greater Maghreb,"<sup>39</sup> the 1959 document adhered more to a contained model, resembling an Arabization of European-style nationalist constitutionalism. Changes to the constitution did not alter operational laws which ruled people in the everyday.<sup>40</sup> However, we are drawing attention here to how incremental changes in Tunisia – these were constitutional amendments that positioned Tunisian priorities in the Islamic world post-2011 – contrasted with the regional milieu. Specifically, Ennahda's constitutional theorization articulated with greater specificity the state's ties to a shared sociocultural history, which contrasted with surrounding states' secular-nationalist foundations (i.e., of Algeria and Egypt)<sup>41</sup> or monarchical foundations (i.e., Morocco's).<sup>42</sup> We need to emphasize here that what mattered for the North African audience was not *simply* Tunisia's relationship to Islam since this audience too emphasizes religion both discursively and in their respective constitutions. Rather, it was Tunisia's material ties to groups that are active regionally, especially the Muslim Brotherhood, and who had posed concrete, and immediate, security and political challenges to these regional states.

A note is in order here regarding the significance of the regional dimension – which is a core analytical element of this article. For all state actors involved – Tunisia and its audience – the preoccupation with "who does what" fades as we move further from the immediate neighbourhood. North African states have been willing to contemplate or effectively engage in global politics that contrast with what they otherwise regionally vocalise or are willing to tolerate. For example, Ennahda's leadership visited China during the Uighur crisis, invited by the Chinese government, and rarely condemned China's policies there. The same can be said for all North African governments.<sup>43</sup>

Here, two important observations should be made to explain the departure from strategic distance. First, the policy move towards Qatar and Turkey from Ennahda's perspective was motivated by a desire to inject shared Islamic beliefs into Tunisian foreign policy role. This role was envisioned by both the popular constituency and the leadership of Ennahda. However, going back to our earlier presentation of case selection, Ennahda was not the only player in Tunisian foreign policy; the secular CPR (Congrès pour la République, or Congress for the Republic) of Moncef Marzouki and Ettakatol of Mustapha Ben Jaafar had a say, and they didn't oppose the alignment with Turkey and Qatar. This adds robustness to our argument that Tunisia as a state, and not just Ennahda, departed from strategic distance.

39 Preamble to the 1959 Tunisian Constitution, see: "Tunisia Tn 028: La Constitution de La République Tunisienne, 1959," WIPO IP Portal, accessed on 10/1/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3vO7Ku8>

40 Yadh Ben Achour, *Une Révolution en Pays d'Islam* (Genève: Labor et Fides, 2018).

41 Preamble to the 1963 Algerian Constitution, see: "Constitution de la République Algérienne Démocratique et Populaire," *Journal Officiel De La République Algérienne* (10 Septembre 1963), accessed on 10/1/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3luHP2s>. For Egypt, see article five of the 1971 Constitution of the Arab Republic of Egypt: "Constitution of the Arab Republic of Egypt 1971," International Labour Organization, accessed on 10/1/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3VRCwwQ>

42 See the 1962 Moroccan Constitution: "MAROC: Constitution du 7 décembre 1962," *Digithèque MJP*, accessed on 10/1/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3VToqLz>

43 On the favorable outcome of Ghannouchi's (as leader of Ennahda) visit to China to meet with the foreign minister on 18 September 2014, see: "Ghannouchi: Ce qui m'a impressionné en Chine," *Leaders*, 10/10/2014, accessed on 10/1/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3X7VuAu>. For an Algerian delegation visit and amicable bilateral talks in China from 28 April through 1 May 2015, see: "Visite de Sellal en Chine: Plusieurs accords de partenariat et contrats conclus," *Algeria-watch*, 13/12/2009, accessed on 10/1/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3VRE6yM>. For the visit by Mohammed VI to China in 10 May 2016, see: "Visite officielle de SM le Roi en République populaire de Chine," *Royaume du Maroc, Maroc.ma*, 10/5/2016, accessed on 10/1/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3jUqA08>. For the official visit of President Xi to Cairo on 20 January 2016, see: Lin Noueihed & Ali Abdelaty, "China's Xi visits Egypt, offers financial, political support," *Reuters*, 21/1/2016, accessed on 10/1/2023, at: <https://reut.rs/3jUpilN>. Finally, on the Morocco-China talks (22 October 2020) that did not contain any acknowledgment of the Uighur issue, see: Royaume du Maroc, Ministère des affaires étrangères de la coopération africaine et des marocains résidant à l'étranger, "M. Bourita s'entretient avec le ministre d'état et ministre des affaires étrangères de la république populaire de Chine, M. Wang Yi," 22/10/2020, accessed on 10/1/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3VNx9Pj>

Second, Ennahda alone was not responsible for the dramatic shift in Tunisia's political system. The Ennahda mandate provided a channel for popular interest in pan-Islamic supranational ideals to enter the political infrastructure. These ideals persisted following the movement's cession of power through periodic relegation to coalition status or general domestic disunity under nascent political pluralism.<sup>44</sup> It is unsurprising that later political alternatives such as Nidaa Tounes and its technocratic leadership – though of a decidedly different, more secularist philosophy – carried the mantle of aspects of this regional political alignment after its accession to coalition rule in 2014, due to the lingering influence of Ennahda and its contribution to an agenda it had a prominent – but only partial – role in formulating.<sup>45</sup>

Regarding the re-direction of foreign policy, Ennahda's constituency favoured engagement in MENA in support of pan-Islamic causes. This engagement, however, would necessarily constitute a break from Tunisia's strategic distance.<sup>46</sup> Regionally, the increase in the political profile of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood (MB), culminating in the election of Mohammad Morsi to the presidency, galvanized political Islam, including throughout Tunisia. The Tunisian Ennahda's position was to move closer to its Egyptian counterpart. For Egypt, and others in the region, the rise in the power of political Islam was bound to generate struggles, and the subsequent removal of Morsi was a demonstration of resistance to political Islamism. However, momentarily, the regional environment seemed to have changed for Tunisia's Ennahda, and to have become conducive to overhauling foreign policy, given the shocks of regional societal revolts. Ennahda founder Rached Ghannouchi overtly proposed in a 2011 interview a hypothetical trans-regional MB governance via coalition.<sup>47</sup> Ghannouchi had no official role in the state prior to his election as parliament speaker in 2019, but Ennahda had a role. In essence, support given to the Muslim Brotherhood might have *only* been discursive, but it did emanate from the founder of a party in the ruling coalition – not just any politician or civil society activist. Audiences understand the status of such individuals in politics, whether or not they happen to be in an official capacity.<sup>48</sup>

Soon after, Tunisian president Marzouki branded Egypt's army takeover in 2013 an illegitimate coup d'état against the democratically elected president Morsi. These foreign policies were especially prominent under Minister of Foreign Affairs Rafiq Albulsalam – Ghannouchi's son in law.<sup>49</sup> These came against a backdrop of voices from Tunisia's Ennahda and related think tanks in 2012 counselling Egyptian counterparts on feasible political accommodation tactics in Egypt.<sup>50</sup> These policies represented a departure from strategic distance vis-à-vis the region on both popular and institutional levels.<sup>51</sup>

In Libya, citing historic linkages to the greater Maghreb, Tunisia embraced intervention through foreign policy initiatives including renewed humanitarian support for displaced Libyan

44 "Tunisia Parliament Approves Unity Government," *Aljazeera*, 6/2/2015, accessed on 10/1/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3ii58lg>

45 Giulia Cimini, "The Economic Agendas of Islamic Parties in Tunisia and Morocco: Between Discourses and Practices," *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies*, vol. 11, no. 3 (2017), p. 50.

46 Aisha Abbas, *Jadaliyyat al-Sulṭa wa-l-Mu'āraḍa al-Siyāsiyya fī Tūnis: Dirāsa Taḥlīliyya fī 'Ilāqāt al-Širā' wa-l-Taḥā'ul wa-l-Iḥtīwā'* (Jordan: Dar al-Khaleej lil-Nashr wa-l-Tawzee', 2020). In this first free election, the Islamist Ennahda won more than 41% of the vote, securing 90 seats of the 217 Constituent Assembly. See: "Tunisia's Islamist Ennahda Party Wins Historic Poll," *BBC NEWS*, 27/10/2011, accessed on 10/1/2023, at: <https://bbc.in/3ZjYjJK>

47 Marc Lynch, "Rached Ghannouchi: The FP Interview," *Foreign Policy* (December 5, 2012), accessed on 10/1/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3CiTaM9>

48 Perhaps the most prominent other example is Putin's position in the Russian state in-between his presidencies.

49 Konrad Pedziwiatr & Rachela Tonta, "Turbulent Muslim Renaissance in Tunisia: Interview with Ennahda's Yusra Ghannouchi," *Jadaliyya* (June 4, 2014). See also interview with President Marzouki: "Exclusive Interview: Tunisian President Marzouki," *Al-Monitor*, 22/9/2012, accessed on 10/1/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3QjjQoA>

50 David Hearst, "Muslim Brotherhood Urged to Share Power in Egypt," *The Guardian*, 12/6/2012, accessed on 10/1/2023, at:

51 See, for example: "Tunisie-Ennahdha Organise Une Deuxième Manifestation de Soutien À Mohamed Morsi," *Business News*, 10/7/2013, accessed on 10/1/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3GnTux7>

refugees.<sup>52</sup> Tunisia's position on Libya's peace process appeared to be part of an individual agenda which ran counter to collaborative efforts by Algeria and Egypt to mitigate the fallout from the civil war. Rejection of the regional consensus fed the growing conception of Tunisia as a threat to regional stability, particularly as Libya became further associated with militants gaining unchecked spaces to organize.<sup>53</sup> What we explain later, however, is that after 2013, while Ennahda and others commenced a reverting to strategic distance, relations with Egypt became coarse owing mainly to the ideological commitment to the MB which Ennahda did not abandon, while positive relations developed between Ghannouchi and the Algerian president (coupled with efforts to remedy ties).<sup>54</sup>

With Syria's uprising gathering strength, reports suggested that local mosques in Tunisia were mobilizing fighters to travel to Syria. Despite denying these reports, Ennahda continued its support for actors championing Islamic political principles.<sup>55</sup> Tunisia's self-proclaimed identification with the ideological foundations of the Syrian resistance movement caused aggressive opposition to the Assad regime on the diplomatic front.<sup>56</sup> Meanwhile, Tunisia was vocal in its assumption of common cause with Gazans.<sup>57</sup>

As governance further stabilized early in the decade and the Tunisian transition proved – at least in the short term – a successful model of pluralism, new Tunisian leaders maintained this unprecedented international voice, even when apathetic to the Islamist component. As late as under the tenure of Prime Minister Habib Essid – who had no association to Ennahda – Tunisia displayed elements of residual commitment to its expansive policies. Tunisia's shift in foreign policy was thus a function of a wide array of actors manoeuvring in the maelstrom of an unprecedented political opportunity after 2011.

In 2012-14 in Tunisia, Ennahda's influence was affected by a power struggle between Marzouki's CPR, Ettakatol, Ennahda, and the establishment (i.e., incumbent governments and their elites and grassroot bases).<sup>58</sup> A Tunisian foreign policy that departed from strategic distance and is devoid of a sole architect – be it one party or a galvanizing leader – was reached by way of a populace newly emboldened to voice itself externally. An unstable North Africa met Tunisia's changed posture with displeasure, which is what we explain next. Tunisia's changed posture occurred in the midst of deteriorating regional security.<sup>59</sup>

52 Isabelle Mandraud, "Kadhafi est Toujours là" Pour les Libyens de Tunis," *Le Monde*, 13/5/2014, accessed on 10/1/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3WSGt5I>

53 On the turbulent domestic Libyan process post-Qaddafi, see: Nathalie Guibert, Yves-Michel Riols & H el ene Sallon, "Libya's Tripoli and Tobruk dilemma no nearer to resolution," *The Guardian*, 27/1/2015, accessed on 10/1/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3GtMj6W>. On Tunisia's stance on Libyan politics, see: "Tunisia Demands Fair Trial Guarantees for Libya's ex-PM," *France 24*, 2/1/2012, <https://bit.ly/3VKRzZm>

54 Abdelaziz Bouteflika welcomed Ghannouchi on 13 March 2016: "Rached Ghannouchi re u par le pr esident alg erien Abdelaziz Bouteflika," *Realties*, 14/3/2016, accessed on 9/5/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3VHeSox>. Moreover, after cultivating favorable relations with now-President Tebboune under the Bouteflika government, reference was made to Ghannouchi supporting an alliance with Algeria during a 23 February 2021 *Diwan FM* radio interview. See: "Tunisie: Rached Ghannouchi tente-t-il de se rapprocher de l'Alg erie?" *Jeune Afrique*, 8/3/2021, accessed on 10/1/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3VTCkxf>

55 On Tunisian support for resistance groups in Syria, see: "Tunisia Gives 'Moral' Support to Syria Rebels: Ennahda," *Morocco World News*, 13/3/2013, accessed on 10/1/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3CvdjSh>

56 On Tunisia's diplomatic position regarding Syria, see: Tarek Amara, "Tunisia 'to Withdraw' Recognition of Syria Government," *Reuters*, 4/2/2012, accessed on 10/1/2023, at: <https://reut.rs/3Izs7Dj>

57 See a speech by president Marzouki at the United Nations on 25 September 2014: "A Speech by Tunisian President Moncef Marzouki in the General Assembly," United Nations, United Nations News, 25/9/2014, accessed on 5/2/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3X6a1fH>

58 In 2015-19, internal struggles involved Caid Essebsi (Nidaa Tunis with him) moving with and against the establishment vs. Ennahda vs. public opinion. By 2019-22, it was Kais Saied vs. Ennahda vs. the establishment, which was looking negatively toward his presidential power centralization.

59 Tunisian foreign minister negatively evaluated Egypt's ability to realize its own proposal to establish an Arab anti-terrorism task force. See "Egypt Proposal for Arab Force 'Unrealistic': Tunisia," *Middle East Monitor*, 12/3/2015, <https://bit.ly/3VTFvFb>

## Why Would North Africa Have Expected Tunisia to Maintain Strategic Distance?

This section explains why North African states converged in their expectations of Tunisia to maintain strategic distance and thus had a strong structuring effect on foreign policy roles.<sup>60</sup> Theoretically, and more broadly, is the idea that some states carry more influence than others, which RT explains in terms of the socializing significance where dependencies and power relations matter.<sup>61</sup>

Tunisia has three prominent North African state audiences – Algeria, Egypt, and Morocco. They had witnessed Tunisia's pursuit of strategic distance over the preceding decades and had a critical role in developing this posture through their political engagements with, and pressures on, Tunisia. Societal mobilization and revolts across North Africa after 2010 had implications on the domestic politics of all regional states. What is remarkable, however, is how these North African states converged in their expectations of Tunisia to maintain strategic distance, despite their own rivalries and historic disagreements over the regional order. This section explains the sources of this audience's expectations.

### Algeria and Morocco's Intense Rivalry

For Algeria, by the mid-2000s, sporadic flareups between holdover militant groups from the civil war and the Algerian state had significantly decreased. The granting of amnesty, selective cooperation between the National Liberation Front (FLN), and opponents essentially extinguished a receding civil war.<sup>62</sup> While previous generations of potential regime challengers were immobilized by the fear instilled through sweeping campaigns of civil violence, by the 2010s the threat of Islamism and militant insurgency was sufficiently remote that dissatisfaction with the state could once more permeate the political environment. The Algerian government was acutely aware of growing resentment of civil-liberty-abridging policies held over from the 1992 state of emergency, and recognized the need to placate these tensions, especially after the onset of Arab spring protests in surrounding nations inspired similar domestic demonstrations. However, regional revolts after 2010 mobilized popular dissent against "the establishment", culminating in widespread demonstrations against price hikes and unemployment, and their association with closed political systems.<sup>63</sup> The aforementioned state of emergency, which had received tacit acceptance amid the active civil conflict, was lifted in 2011 after popular protests cautioned the government against continued abridgement of civil liberties.

The Moroccan leadership's perceptions of regional politics can be viewed as following a domestic-focused logic similar to Algeria. While Morocco did not have a civil conflict at the scale of Algeria's in its recent past, surrounding protests in 2011 fomented civil disobedience and popular

60 Thies, "State Socialization and Structural Realism."

61 Harnisch, "Role Theory: Operationalization of Key Concepts," 11-12.

62 Most notable of these opponents is the GSPC (the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat) which was the precursor of AQIM (Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb) itself neutralized as a viable threat by internal dysfunction. On amnesty, see: "La charte pour la paix et la réconciliation nationale," *Republique Algerienne Démocratique Et Populaire*, 23/11/2015, accessed on 10/1/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3GIPWqS>; On cooperation, see: "La plate-forme de Rome in 1995," *Le monde diplomatique*, Mars 1995, accessed on 10/1/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3ZfHxIV>. See also: José Garçon, "L'armée du FIS appelle au cessez-le-feu en Algérie. Un succès des militaires, qui ne garantit pas la fin des violences," *Libération*, 25/9/1997, accessed on 10/1/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3vOt1E0>

63 See a 2011 report by *Le Monde* on the state of emergency in Algeria: "Algérie: L'état d'urgence levé en Algérie," *Le Monde*, 24/2/2011, accessed on 10/1/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3VWzHdT>. See a 2011 report by Al Jazeera on protests on a backdrop of increasing unemployment and rising costs of living: "Price Protests Erupt Across Algeria," *Aljazeera*, 7/1/2011, accessed on 10/1/2023 at: <https://bit.ly/3ZgpvS>. See a report on Algerian opposition announcing public demonstrations in February 2011: "L'opposition algérienne annonce une nouvelle marche le 19 février," *Libération*, 13/2/2011, accessed on 10/1/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3WVkBqG>

pushes for constitutional reform.<sup>64</sup> Grievances of the broad-based reform movement's proponents – coming from socialist, liberal, and Islamist circles among other diverse ideological camps, and skewing disproportionately toward the youth – were anchored in perceived government corruption and economic mismanagement. Viewing the limited participatory mechanisms nullified by the monarchy's co-optation of existing political parties and intercession in nominally independent governance areas, these popular protests called for restraints on the monarchy's role. Critically, the movement prioritized constitutional reforms and liberalization, which were more modest than contemporary protests calling for the dismantling of regimes altogether, which may explain why Moroccan leadership was largely more amenable to concessions. Reforms introduced to the 2011 Moroccan Constitution, framed as liberalizing, received national assent when put forth in a referendum.<sup>65</sup> Nonetheless, the internal unrest was sufficient to convince leadership that a national focus on rivalry with Algeria would provide a convenient and necessary means of dampening dissent. For example, there were efforts by the Moroccan government to co-opt protests and integrate the Justice and Development Party in government instead of imposing harsh crackdowns. This accompanied a renewed intensity in the rivalry with Algeria; the result was a focal shift in Morocco from pro-reform dissenters to threats to security, including through interstate conflict.<sup>66</sup>

Part of the attempt to alleviate internal burdens – in both Algeria and Morocco – was to divert attention to their longstanding rivalry, thus enabling its escalation. Hence, if the turn of the 21st century represented a cooling of the Algeria-Morocco rivalry, the post-2010 political environment brought the rivalry to the forefront. This oppositionality was expressed in various forms, including heated exchanges over the 2020 Moroccan-Israeli normalization talks,<sup>67</sup> sustaining memories of destructive colonial legacies,<sup>68</sup> tensions over the 2017 launch of the Moroccan reconnaissance satellite EO Sat 1, which prompted a response in the form of a high-tech border wall designed to counter purported smuggling into Algeria,<sup>69</sup> accusations of arms and drugs trafficking to undermine the other,<sup>70</sup> and respective stances/accusations on Western-Saharan independence amid the escalation of the Moroccan-Sahrawi conflict.<sup>71</sup>

64 Morocco has the Western Sahara issue, which Rabat considers as an integral part of its territory, and which sparks fears of territorial division.

65 The 2011 Moroccan Constitution included key provisions transferring authority from the monarch to parliament and expanding liberal protections. See the Constitution at: Royaume du Maroc, Secrétariat Général du Gouvernement, *La Constitution: Edition 2011*, Serie Documentation Juridique Marocaine, accessed on 10/1/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3Cs3V1u>

66 Karine Bennafla & Haouès Seniguer, "Le Maroc à l'épreuve du printemps arabe: Une contestation désamorcée," *Outre-Terre*, no. 29 (2011), pp. 153 - 155. See also the Morocco government portal for a text of the King's address (19 March 2013): "Texte intégral du discours adressé par SM le Roi à la Nation," *Royaume du Maroc, Maroc.ma*, 9/3/2011, accessed on 2/4/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3CMA8pb>. Moreover, we read an emphasis on the "territorial integrity" of Morocco when king Mohammed VI announced a reform agenda, indicating a rhetorical shift accompanying the return of Algeria as a politicised threat away from "now placated" internal opposition. It should be noted that in the above Algeria is not expressly mentioned by Moroccan leadership. Whereas other sources show the shifting security status following the 2011 protests which created conditions conducive to renew the Morocco-Algeria rivalry; see: Rasmus Alenius Boserup, Luis Martinez & Ulla Holm, "Algeria after the Revolts: Regime Endurance in a Time of Contention and Regional Insecurity," *Danish Institute for International Studies Report*, no. 15 (2014), accessed on 10/1/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/31vf0D2>

67 Ryad Hamadi, "Normalisation avec Israël: Le Maroc répond à l'Algérie," *TSA*, 20/12/2020, accessed on 10/1/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3CtTJFV>

68 Algerian politicians continue to invoke Morocco's more peaceful transition to independence to vilify France's regional politics. Targeting France's colonizing past in public discourse is undivorceable from its association with Morocco, and an indirect means of furthering a wedge between Algeria and Morocco. See: Ryad Hamadi, "Djaaboub traite la France d'ennemi traditionnel et éternel' de l'Algérie," *TSA*, 8/4/2021, accessed on 10/1/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3jYpSPj>

69 The launch – ostensibly aimed at furthering state ability to combat ISIL and other militants – drew Algerian criticism, deepened by French contribution to the project. See: "Morocco's Secret Launch Of A Powerful Observation Satellite Puts Neighbouring Countries On Alert," *France 24*, 21/11/2017, accessed on 10/1/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3CwT3Qe>

70 On the "wall" see: Safaa Kasraoui, "Algeria Launches Construction of 'High-Tech' Border Wall at Moroccan Border," *Morocco World News*, 31/10/2017, accessed on 4/2/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3Wb1yrd>. See also: "L'Algérie accuse le Maroc d'entretenir 'le trafic des armes' aux frontières," *Le desk*, 12/4/2021, accessed on 10/1/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3k1dluQ>

71 For an encompassing analysis of the rivalry, see: Yahia H. Zoubir, "The Algerian-Moroccan Rivalry: Constructing the Imagined Enemy," in: Imad Mansour & William R. Thompson (eds.), *Shocks and Rivalries in the Middle East and North Africa* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2020).



Finally, a critical means through which the reinvigorated Algeria-Morocco rivalry has been expressed has been manipulation of Islamic non-state actors (a facet of their rivalry almost absent in its previous iterations). The intense civil conflict and regional fragmentation of the 1990s and 2000s catalysed both states' heightened emphasis on securing the support of substate factions deemed more compatible with their respective interests/ideology as a bulwark against the mobilization of regime opponents. This shift in regime priorities explains the competition between the two states to secure the support of the Tijani Tariqa, an Islamic Sufi religious order that has attracted followers from Senegal, Gambia, Mauritania, Benin, Guinea, and Mali.<sup>72</sup> The tendency to cultivate support from Islamic moderates is a direct product of the states' issues with political fragmentation in the previous era. Given that they had felt the necessity of integrating subpopulations into the national apparatus during substate conflict, the practice was logical to adopt in an interstate context as part of their leveraging of territorial, or positional, disputes.

Moreover, the spiritual importance of the Tijani Tariqa for a large segment of the Maghrebi population has made it an ideal target for both Algerian and Moroccan assistance, as both rivals try to secure its loyalty and, with it, undermine the moral and social legitimacy of the other.<sup>73</sup> In competing over support of a Sufi order often seen as pacifist, Morocco and Algeria were both attempting to maximize the benefits of being seen as allied with Islamic "moderates", as opposed to Salafi or Jihadi extremists such as AQIM (Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb). This competition over Sufi support did nothing, however, to actually deal with the security threats posed by more extremist groups. Moreover, this posturing in support of Islamic moderates served to strategically marginalize the debate opened up by the 2010 revolts on socioeconomic underdevelopment and marginalization in the MENA, a key factor in fuelling radicalism, by foregrounding the threat of religious extremism and stoking religious sensibilities, rather than addressing the regional revolts' core demands.<sup>74</sup>

### Egypt's Revived Activism in North Africa, and the Libyan Theatre

Egypt's growing presence in North African politics throughout the decade following the 2011 revolt was driven by its leaders' efforts to normalize the outcome of the 2013 coup by reaching out to demonstrate their state's relevance to regional stability.<sup>75</sup> This position was rendered further necessary amid the absence of concrete Libyan governance, thus positioning Egypt as an asset within the neighbourhood. Egypt's regional activism in 2011-2020, thus, was concentrated in Libya. Initially denying any intent to intercede in Libya, an Egypt confident of regional backing legitimized intervention under the pretext of proximity to Egyptian boundaries, and international obligation to end human suffering.<sup>76</sup> The convergence of regional security interests ultimately armed Egypt with more confidence to act in Libya.

Egyptian re-entry into the African Union (AU) dialogues came with a heightened emphasis on the regional militant crisis and provided for the normalization of relations between itself and states like Algeria that had previously maintained a harsh oppositionality. Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's first speech before the AU and

72 Sarah Alaoui, "Morocco, commander of the (African) faithful?," Brookings, 8/4/2019, accessed on 10/1/2023, at: <https://brook.gs/2WU65zP>

73 Ahmad Weld Yahia, "The Soufi Tariqas: A New Confrontation in the Morocco-Algeria Struggle," *Bawabat al-Awsat*, 15/5/2014, accessed on 1/2/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3WQ4Cd7>

74 Karim Msawleh, *al-Amn fi Mantiqat al-Sāhil wa-l Šahrā' fi Afrīqiya* (Abu Dhabi: Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research, 2014), pp. 92 - 94.

75 Initially, the 2013 deposal of the Morsi-led MB government spurred a significant change in Egypt's regional posturing, as surrounding states criticized the newly-installed el-Sisi government as antithetical to self-determination and democracy. Egypt's reputational issues hampered their participation in international initiatives, when banned from the African Union and excluded from regional talks; this led to the imposing of sanctions by the Peace and Security Council (AU PSC Communiqué, 2013). See the Communiqué at: "Communiqué of the Peace and Security Council of the African Union (AU), at its 384th Meeting on the Situation in the Arab Republic of Egypt," *African Union*, 9/7/2013, accessed on 10/1/2023 at: <https://bit.ly/3jUWSIn>

76 Egypt announced on 24 July 2014 that it has no plans for military intervention in Libya, see: "No plan for military intervention in Libya: Egypt FM," *Ahram Online*, 5/8/2014, accessed on 10/1/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3GNZ91d>. However, Egypt called for humanitarian-driven international intervention in Libya, see: "Egypt Calls for foreign Intervention in Libya," *Aljazeera*, 17/2/2015, accessed on 10/1/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3ZmK4L1>

UN observers at the 2014 Malabo Summit emphasized Egypt's commitment to mitigating the threat posed by substate actors – notably radical Islamist militants – in the region. This process of normalization imbued Egypt with a resurgent prominence in international affairs in spite of its isolation from African decision-making following the 2013 coup, even seeing Sisi ascend to the presidency of the AU for the 2019-2020 term.<sup>77</sup>

Egypt's president travelled to Algeria in 2014 in search of common ground to counter rising militancy in Libya (and regionally) and found in Algeria a receptive audience. Both states needed to counter the pressing disorder, political fragmentation, and mass violence emerging from the Libyan crisis and the influx of militants from the Sahel. Moreover, Algeria's supply of energy signalled willingness to overlook the schism between the two states caused by the 2013 coup.<sup>78</sup> Furthering its newfound influence, Egypt assumed a determinative role in the absorption of refugees to gain "international legitimacy despite increased authoritarianism and human rights abuses", distinguishing it both from the EU – whose domestic political divisions and security preoccupations diluted their contribution to refugee management – and from less activist regional states.<sup>79</sup> Egypt also solicited foreign partnerships (such as from Russia, even if modest), that were important after the loss of US aid following the 2013 coup.<sup>80</sup>

Turkey occupied an important dimension in Egypt's regional politics, given their shared interest in Libya. Unlike the warm relations extended to Egypt's MB government by Turkey's own, the post-2013 government in Egypt drew public condemnation by the Turkish state.<sup>81</sup> What then ensued was an indirect foreign policy competition, such as Egypt's closure of its ports to Turkish trade, and a direct one whereby the Libyan civil war provided a convenient medium for Turkey to act against Egypt.<sup>82</sup> The Erdogan government has stood behind the Government of National Accord (GNA) and against the Libyan National Army (LNA) led by Khalifa Haftar, in no small part due to Egyptian support for the latter. The above highlights how Egypt's regime post 2013 spent the better part of the decade purging ideological political alignments in regional politics formed under the brief rule of the MB.

In sum, North African states converged around an expectation that Tunisia would not abandon strategic distance. Tunisian strategic distance reduced uncertainty for the North African audience. It is worth noting here that Egypt's increased presence in Libya and its more assertive regional politics did not provoke a backlash – by Algeria and Morocco in particular – in the same way that Tunisia's change in foreign policy did. Hence, it was not a change in politics that mattered, but the contents of such change. Acceptance of Egypt's growing North Africa presence derived from it joining the security consensus of Algeria and Morocco, regardless of what else Egypt did. Thus, Egypt's acceptance was due to its different regional

77 Yasser Elnaggar, "Egypt and the African Union," *MEI@75*, 10/2/2020, accessed on 10/1/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3Cr7wgf>. Moreover, riding on regional instability to rebuild Egypt's international standing opened additional pathways for internal development and capacity-building, such as its successful negotiation of IMF loans; opportunities that may have otherwise been unavailable had Egypt not been recast as a check on militancy in North Africa. See: "IMF Executive Board Approves US\$12 Billion Extended Arrangement Under the Extended Fund Facility for Egypt," *Press Release*, no. 16/501, International Monetary Fund, 11/11/2016, accessed on 10/1/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/2IewqS5>

78 Lamine Chikhi & Maggie Fick, "Algeria, Egypt's Sisi Talk Security, Gas Shipments," *Reuters*, 26/6/2014, accessed on 10/1/2023, at: <https://reut.rs/3WTbFSy>

79 Anna Knoll & Chloe Teevan, "Protecting Migrants and Refugees in North Africa: Challenges and Opportunities for Reform," *Discussion Paper*, no. 281 (Maastricht: The European Centre for Development Policy Management, 2020).

80 Alaa Elhadidi, "Egypt's Shifting Foreign Policy Priorities: How are Abdel Fattah El-Sisi's Foreign Policy Priorities Expected to ,?" *The Cairo Review of Global Affairs* (2018).

81 "Four-finger Salutes as Turks back Egypt Protesters," *Reuters*, 19/8/2013, accessed on 10/1/2023, at <https://reut.rs/3WUcA5g>. As the 2020s has been proving, however, positions can change because the ideology behind them is weak, and physical security threats have taken precedence.

82 For the perspective of Cairo, see: Deya Abaza, "Egypt Will not Renew Transit-trade Agreement with Turkey: Officials," *Ahram Online*, 27/10/2014, accessed on 10/1/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3XfYj2i>. In turn, Turkey, in rebuffing Egyptian rhetorical attacks including accusations of instigating conflict in Libya, counters Egypt's with argument about "it is not surprising that those who have taken over their administration by coup d'état support a putschist [Haftar]" and highlights its dedicated role in combating the Islamic State forces in Syria, such as in "hand-to-hand combat". See: "Statement of the Spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Mr. Hami Aksoy, in Response to a Question Regarding the Statement of the Spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Egypt on the Accusations of Egyptian Foreign," *Latest Press Releases*, QA-44, Republic of Türkiye, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 6 June 2020, accessed on 10/1/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3ihiQF4>

politics from Ennahda's, even if in real terms, much of Egypt's concrete action can be seen as more aggressive than Tunisia's under Ennahda. The following demonstrates how North African states acted to move Tunisia back into strategic distance.

## Audience Cues: North African Reaction to Tunisia's Abandonment of Strategic Distance

North African states did not welcome Tunisia's abandonment of strategic distance, which threatened – however inadvertently – their interests. On a basic level, Tunisia's claim to be a regional champion of ideologically inclined (Islamist) groups did not mesh well with regional governing regimes' politics; even "allies" had reservations about Tunisian élites seeing such a regional role for themselves. Prominently, reservations came from Egypt's MB which did not receive the 2012 "counsel" by Tunisia's Ennahda on political strategy well. The position of Egypt's Brotherhood emerged from a combination of seeing itself as a leader on issues related to political Islam and thus in a position to issue regional advice, as well as its lack of support for the compromises Ennahda had to make domestically, which had negatively implicated its credibility in counselling others.<sup>83</sup> The government that overthrew Egypt's MB rule itself rejected and condemned statements by Tunisia's president in September 2013 at a UN General Assembly meeting that had hinted at the 2013 coup in Egypt being a failure in representative government. Egypt later recalled its ambassador to Tunis in response to the Tunisian president calling for the release of Morsi.<sup>84</sup>

Algeria expressed strong aversion to the prospect of Tunisia abandoning strategic distance. Around mid-2013, accusations were levelled against Ennahda of intervention in Algerian elections to support Algerian Islamist opposition candidates. Algeria's ruling elites, most of whom had been involved in the domestic war of the previous decade, had no interest in seeing their delicate balancing of religious discourse compromised by Tunisian outbidding or activism.<sup>85</sup> Meanwhile, Morocco expressed strong reservations about any state-sponsored regional religious discourse or practice. A key indicator of this position was the Moroccan king's emphasis in 2014 on uprooting extremism and reconciling state sovereignty with moderate religious practice, in an implicit signal to Tunisia that Morocco could not allow Islamism to fester.<sup>86</sup>

Morocco and Algeria watched Tunisia closely to see if it would adopt an activist foreign policy or continue the traditional foreign policy of strategic distance. The two rivals had over the years developed a delicate balance in their approach to Islamic movements, as well as to religion-based political discourse. Their support of Islamic ideals, as well as of political groupings to highlight each others' deficient practices, was carefully designed so as not to create an Islamic force that could not be controlled. As long as they kept both the regional discourse and activism within their respective acceptable frames, the rivals could speak with confidence about their moral superiority relative to the other. Tunisia's Ennahda upset the Morocco-Algeria balance when its foreign policy advocated supra-national activism across state borders.

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83 Hearst.

84 For the Egyptian statement condemning Tunisia's "intervention", see: Rana Muhammad Taha, "Egypt Condemns Tunisia's UNGA Address," *Daily News Egypt*, 27/9/2013, accessed on 10/1/2023, at: Rana Muhammad Taha, "Egypt's Ambassador in Tunis Returns to Egypt," *Daily News Egypt*, 30/9/2013, accessed on 10/1/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3irRHif>

85 Abou Essaoud Lahmidi, "Rached Ghannouchi déclare la guerre à l'Algérie!" *African Manager*, 2/8/2013, accessed on 10/1/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3QqDU8D>

86 See the Moroccan King's speech at Kingdom of Morocco, "Full Text Of The Throne Day Speech Delivered By HM King Mohammed VI," *Maroc.ma*, Royal Speeches, 30/7/2014, accessed on 10/1/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3CSZZr9>

In the midst of Libya's deterioration, Morocco and Algeria feared that Tunisia was opening a hospitable environment that would invite Islamic State fighters returning from the Levant.<sup>87</sup>

Concerns with Tunisia's interventionist foreign policy were compounded when President Marzouki convened the Supreme National Security Council to investigate ways to "help the Tunisian diaspora in Libya."<sup>88</sup> This was seen as intervention in Libya's conflict under the guise of helping Tunisians, and was met with regional disapproval, especially by Algeria, which was trying to end threats coming from Libya via coordination with the Egyptian military.<sup>89</sup> North African states' reactions to combating terrorism remain largely bilaterally organized and executed; however, they converge on combating terrorism, and on identifying a wide range of Islamist political groups through the frame of terrorism.<sup>90</sup> The Ennahda experience exposed the limitations of Tunisia's ability to extend itself on Islamic principles in regional relations. It was met with region-wide disapproval because it went against the perceived interests of *all* actors. Importantly, but not exclusively, throughout decades of dispute, Algeria and Morocco had delicately infused elements of Islamic distinctness in their rivalry and they seemed able to keep a lid on a balanced escalation in ideological discourse. Tunisia's abandoning of strategic distance, towards a pro-Islamic policy, seems to have been perceived as potentially derailing this balance.

North African states converged on the need to restore strategic distance in Tunisian foreign policy. For example, a series of meetings were held in Tunisia in 2014, with Algerian support, to stabilize the rule of Ennahda by promoting domestic dialogue. A stable and open-to-dialogue government, according to the Algerian logic, would be deterred from harbouring subversive factions or encouraging religiously based alliances across the region that might empower Algeria-based actors.<sup>91</sup> Moreover, in 2014, Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia (among other interested states), launched a coordinated operation against Islamic State cells in North Africa.<sup>92</sup>

The bouleversement of the Libyan collapse hastened the turn against Tunisian regional management. Tunisia's concern is mostly its security and economy, which explains Tunisia's established policy of tacit acceptance of the Gaddafi regime necessary to maintain amicable interstate exchanges.<sup>93</sup> Now postcoup considerations such as the extensive emigration from the fallen state gave Tunisia an even more acute interest in management of the conflict. Divisions among Tunisia's political elite over a wide range of issues, including foreign policy, meant that the regional audience would not welcome any leading role for Tunisia in Libya. This, coupled with the new Sisi government's use of the Libyan conflict as a means of leveraging international legitimacy, solidified the collective effort to relegate

87 Peter Cole, *Borderline Chaos? Stabilizing Libya's Periphery* (Washington, DC.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2012).

88 See President Marzouki's supervision during the Supreme Security Council meeting in the Carthage Palace: "Lutfi bin Jiddo: Supreme Security Council Meeting Discussed the Clashes in Libya and its Impact on Tunisia," *babnet*, 16/5/2014, accessed on 10/1/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3GpFCCy>; See an interview with President Marzouki: "Exclusive Interview: Tunisian President Marzouki."

89 Porter (2015, 51-55) argues that Algeria initially opposed other states' Libya intervention; however, and despite its anti-interventionist posture, Algeria accepted Egypt's strikes, prioritizing security. Geoff D. Porter, "Le non-interventionnisme de l'Algérie en question," *Politique étrangère*, no. 3 (2015), pp. 43 - 55.

90 Yahia H. Zoubir, "Security Challenges in the Maghreb: The Nexus between Bad Governance and Violent Extremism," *EuroMeSCo Brief*, no. 70 (2017).

91 Meetings between Algeria and Tunisia aimed at creating joint task forces to share intelligence related to movement of people and goods. See: Ibrahim Menshawi, "cautious direction: The Algerian Position Toward the Evolution of Events in Tunisia," Arab Center for Research and Studies, 8/4/2015, accessed on 10/1/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3ikhWHM>

92 Ahmad Weld Yahia, "'ghost hunting' is a Maghrebi regional plan to track 'ISIS' members," *Bawabat al-Awsat* 27/8/2014, accessed on 10/1/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3CvCd3X>. In addition to coordinating with Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco were also resistant to Tunisian calls to resurrect the Arab Maghreb Union. See: Julien Peyron, "La Tunisie s'engage seule dans la relance de l'Union du Maghreb," *France 24*, 4/7/2012, accessed on 10/1/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3GrkOus>

93 Hamza Meddeb, *The Volatile Tunisia-Libya Border: Between Tunisia's Security Policy and Libya's Militia Factions* (Beirut: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2020), pp. 3-4, accessed on 10/1/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3jYqG74>



Tunisia to a secondary role in Libyan affairs. Tunisia had its own vested interest in dampening the effects of Libya's fragmentation, being immediately burdened with militant movement and spillover from the unstable polity that invited arms circulation and terrorist attacks across its borders.<sup>94</sup> Nonetheless, the international security preoccupation was so strong following the insufficient UN-imposed transition procedure that an interstate consensus formed against the mere possibility that Tunisia – through its pan-Islamic rhetoric and unification efforts – might feed substate militant mobilization, even when such mobilization actively threatened the state itself. Though Tunisia had made some diplomatic inroads within the neighbourhood, such cooperation was largely bilateral and not the broad transnational development it sought, which was precluded by growing security concerns.<sup>95</sup>

## Tunisian Reversion to Strategic Distance

For all the transitioning governments' efforts to establish a sustainable political infrastructure, Tunisia lacked the internal cohesion and material capacity to resist retaliation by its neighbours, and swiftly capitulated. In the midst of domestic disorganization, mounting regional pressure pushed Tunisia around mid-2014 to a return to its achieved foreign policy role.<sup>96</sup> Many Islamist parties emphasized the need to maintain strategic distance. With mounting internal labour and political demands, "expansive" and contra traditional foreign policy decisions catalysed domestic divisions; public opinion on government performance plummeted, and the sitting coalition was voted out. Tunisia's government publicly signalled its reversion to a posture of strategic distance from destabilizing regional politics and reiterated the need for regional collaboration to find solutions to collective security challenges – especially the mobility of weapons and fighters.<sup>97</sup>

In one form of reversion to strategic distance, Tunisia ramped up its deference to respected international legal frameworks and shared norms, in a move reminiscent of its long-held legalist position. For example, when Egyptian leadership reproached Tunisia for facilitating the GNA's installation in Libya, Tunisia merely reemphasized its commitment to regional stability under the broader UN effort.<sup>98</sup> In addition, Tunisian foreign policy has since confirmed its interest in multilateral security coordination and deference to the lead of other North African states, in recognition of its inability to sway key issues throughout the region.<sup>99</sup> This Tunisian approach persisted. For example, in October 2019, Foreign Affairs Minister Khémaies Jhinaoui proclaimed Tunisia's intention to step

94 "Tunisia Arrests Libyan 'Terrorist' with Explosives," *Reuters*, 9/5/2013, accessed on 10/1/2023, at: <https://reut.rs/3jWcQ51>. On attacks and their effects, see: Benoît Delmas, "Ben Guerdane: L'attaque terroriste la plus grave subie par la Tunisie," *Le Point Afrique* (2016).

95 On the Tunisian-Algerian bilateral dimension, see: "Algérie: Abdelmalek Sellal reçoit Adnane Manser," *Business News*, 10/1/2014, accessed on 10/1/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3ZaTxVI>; on the Tunisia-Morocco bilateral dimension, see the 2014 Tunisia-Morocco cooperation decree: "Décret n° 2014 - 3644 du 3 octobre 2014, portant ratification de l'accord de coopération dans le domaine de l'environnement entre le gouvernement de la République Tunisienne et le gouvernement du Royaume du Maroc," *Journal Officiel de la République Tunisienne*, no. 84, 17/10/2014, p. 2734.

96 Khadija Mohsen-Finan, "Tunisia: The Running Battle Between the Government and the UGTT," *OrientXXI*, 30/3/2017, accessed on 10/1/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3vHMoyO>

97 Messages by Tunisia to clarify its foreign policy change persisted. For example, in reaction to the Mali military flare-up and the hostage-taking in an oil refinery in Algeria in 2013, the Tunisian president called upon regional countries to "unify efforts and security policies" to fend off violence and terrorism. See: "Tunisian Government expresses concern toward 'security reflections from the situation in Mali,'" *Akhbar Muritania*, accessed on 10/1/2023, at: <http://goo.gl/CgjPRL>. See also news report on the Tunisian-Algerian security collaboration: "Tunisia officially asks for Algeria's 'rescue' and will send a security and political delegation headed by the foreign minister tomorrow," *Dunya al-Watan*, 5/8/2013, accessed on 1/10/2923, at: <http://goo.gl/yQT3fl>. An example is the Algeria-Tunisia security cooperation in the bordering Chaambi Mountains to combat AQIM.

98 On Egypt's stance from Libya, see: Walid al-Talili, "Tunisia in Libya: the non-stance policy to avoid external outrage," *Al-Arabi al-Jadid*, 13/5/2022, accessed on 10/1/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3IxTZaF>. On the Egypt-Tunisia position over Libya, see: "The Egyptian Initiative to solve the Libyan crisis," *State Information Service*, 16/6/2022, accessed on 10/1/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3Gt3PYI>

99 On Tunisia's coordination with Algeria and Morocco over antiterrorism campaigns, see: "La Tunisie veut renforcer sa coopération antiterroriste avec l'Algérie et le Maroc," *France 24*, 11/5/2016, accessed on 10/1/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3ZjsHuy>



up its presence throughout MENA. The minister's proclamation couched this expanded role within UN primacy, not along ideological/partisan lines.<sup>100</sup> Moreover, there has been a discursive emphasis on Tunisia's particular pan-Islamic "moderate" identity, as distinct from arguably non-moderate Salafist and jihadist viewpoints. Within this moderate frame, Tunisian foreign policy is explained as being non-ideological.

Importantly, the ideological component of Tunisia's international posturing has been extensively retooled to bring it into harmony with international consensus. A related discursive shift regards Egypt's MB; it still has Tunisian support, but that support arguably has much reduced practical emphasis. This came through clearly in a 2015 interview with the secretary-general of Tunisia's Ennahda.<sup>101</sup> Another recent example of this interest in distancing the Tunisian state from ideological polarization could be seen in Tunisia's position on the important ideological issue of normalization with Israel. While Prime Minister Mechichi rejected normalization with Israel, he offered simultaneous respect for the Moroccan decision to pursue it.<sup>102</sup> Such postures speak to the delicate balancing of state interests and external appeasement, including that of the United States, which had facilitated those dialogues.<sup>103</sup>

Though the sense of a pan-Islamic integrationist duty remained a relevant political stream domestically, it was smothered by a shifting international climate that demanded primacy for security, internal development, and counterterrorism at home. Tunisia internalized pressure from the Arab world to revoke its regional aspirations, a process that was redoubled by external dialogues successfully incentivizing Tunisian actors to discontinue their ideological campaign with the prospect of aid.<sup>104</sup> The reversion can thus in no way be ascribed exclusively to domestic political fluctuations independent of the regional rivalry context. Other substantive products of Tunisia's altered foreign policy include its reversal on Syria's suspension from the Arab league,<sup>105</sup> as well as periodic displays of rapid diplomatic damage control, indicating heightened sensitivity to its reputation in North Africa – Tunisia's main audience.<sup>106</sup>

Expressions of an interest in strategic distance are part of a pattern that emerged early in the reversion timeline. For example, President Marzouki's speech before the European Parliament in 2013 emphasized Tunisia's commitment to the "absorption strategy of the modernist, moderate fraction of Islamism." Drawing parallels between the Maghrebi integration project and the EU, Marzouki praised the latter, stating that "today, what makes us dream is a Maghrebi union, and later Arab, on the model of the European Union, that is a union of democratic states and free peoples, working together for the good of all. The European Union also fascinates us with what it has achieved – most remarkable, not

100 See the statement of the Tunisian Foreign Affairs Minister at: "Khémaies Jhinaoui: La Tunisie sera la voix du monde arabe et de l'Afrique à l'ONU," *La Presse.in*, 10/10/2019, accessed on 10/1/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3ihNaQ1>

101 Yuksel Serdar Oguz, "Q&A with Secretary-general of Tunisia's Ennahda," *Anadolu Agency*, October 20, 2015, accessed on 10/1/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3VVogmZ>

102 See the Tunisian Prime Minister's statement: "Normalisation with Israel 'not on Agenda', Says Tunisian PM," *Aljazeera*, 15/12/2020, accessed on 10/1/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3VSQzIV>

103 For example, Tunisia's tepid response to the Khashoggi assassination prioritized regional appeasement. See: Fayçal Métaoui, "Mohammed ben Salmene est plus ou moins le bienvenu au Maghreb," *Presse-toi à gauche!* 4/12/2018, accessed on 10/1/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3iqGRtl>

104 Silvia Colombo & Benedetta Voltolini, "The EU's Engagement with 'Moderate' Political Islam: The Case of Ennahda," *LSE Middle East Centre Papers Series*, no. 19 (London: LSE Middle East Centre, 2017), pp. 11-13, accessed on 10/1/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3GM6myK>

105 For Tunisia's position on Syria, see: "Tunisia calls for Arab League to readmit Syria," *Aljazeera*, 26/1/2019, accessed on 4/2/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3IxPMUj>

106 On Tunisia mending ties, see: Yosra Ouanes & Gulsen Topcu, "Tunisia Bids to Mend Ties with Algeria," *Andalou Agency*, 16/12/2020, accessed on 4/2/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3QqD1gl>

to say miraculous: the Franco-German reconciliation."<sup>107</sup> This was a targeted appeal to his European audience, aimed at securing European approval of Tunisian-led Arab integration.

In essence, Tunisian foreign policy stabilized from 2014 to 2020. Confirming strategic distance required careful rhetorical shifts from leadership, taking two noteworthy forms. In one form, Tunisian political élites moved away from unintimidated criticisms of regional states' reactions to their domestic societal mobilization, to statements that were no longer indifferent to regional reaction.<sup>108</sup> Many Tunisian élites themselves articulated the need to dial back hospitality to political Islam. In 2016, former Nidaa Tounes Secretary-general Mohsen Marzouk professed the party's need to abandon political Islam in an interview following his own desertion.<sup>109</sup> While he admittedly hailed from the "secularist wing" of the party, Marzouk's statements still demonstrate a recognition of such politics' sullied international optics. Evidently the shifting landscape altered partisan politics, as well as foreign policy decision-making.

Elsewhere, Tunisia sought to bridge the gap with regional states under the rhetorical umbrella of greater Maghrebi unity through convergence on the security agenda. Tunisia's imperative to secure its population against substate militantism prioritized the need for regional accord with its policies.<sup>110</sup> The security (counterterrorism) imperative that necessitates that Tunisia reconciles its agenda with North African states was leveraged domestically to justify an inward turn in policymaking.<sup>111</sup> Tunisian foreign policy focused mostly on marketing the country's economic attractiveness; the precursor was securing the country and the neighbourhood through regional cooperation, providing an added affirmation for strategic distance.<sup>112</sup> Reactions were supportive from regional states.<sup>113</sup> Nevertheless, North African states remained close observers of Tunisia's domestic politics and potential foreign policy ramifications.<sup>114</sup>

## Tunisia's 2020-2022 Political Impasse

The complex web of regional precarious balancing of interests that made abandoning strategic distance untenable persisted after 2020 and saw serious challenges recently, especially from discontented citizens. These challenges include anti regime protests such as the post 2020 Algerian uprisings, youth unemployment and fluctuating energy markets, and the destabilizing COVID-19 pandemic which has been severely demanding on an already struggling economy. We expect domestic pressures to keep Tunisian policy makers committed

107 See the speech of the 2013 Tunisian President to the EU Parliament: "Moncef Marzouki, Président de la République tunisienne," *Europarl*, accessed on 1/10/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3ZmILM2>

108 See the speech of Rached Ghannouchi at a Carnegie Endowment for International Peace event in Washington D.C. on 26 February 2014: "Rached Ghannouchi on Tunisia's Democratic Transition," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 2014, accessed on 10/1/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3ioUU2s>

109 Frédéric Bobin, "En Tunisie, 'le parti Nidaa Tounès est devenu une coquille vide'," *Le Monde*, 16/3/2016, accessed on 10/1/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3IzL3lc>

110 The March 2015 Bardo National Museum attacks in Tunis and the June 2015 attack on a hotel in Port El Kantaoui exposed the severity of threats posed by porous borders and the country's reliance on the security and intelligence apparatuses of neighboring states. These incidents confirmed that Tunisia's national interest is served by meeting regional expectations, especially when its economic performance is dependent on these regional states' security support. See: Abdenour Benantar, "Algeria's Security Policy: Transformations and Dilemmas in the Context of Regional Unrest and Internal Hīrāk," *AlMuntaqa*, vol. 5, no. 2 (September 2022), p. 77.

111 "Tunisia's Ennahda Distances Itself from Political Islam," *Aljazeera*, 21/5/2016, accessed on 10/1/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3ilxVp4>

112 Attacks inside Tunisia highlighted the need for intra-regional security cooperation, as well as cooperation across the MENA and the Sahel; regional conflicts and rivalries especially between Algeria and Morocco impede the construction of robust security institutions. See: Samia Errazzouki, "Lost in the Debate: Beyond Dominant Narratives on the Western Sahara," *Jadaliyya*, 3/6/2013, accessed on 10/1/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3GYiDAI>.

113 For the Algerian position, see for example: "Depuis Tunis, Abdelmalek Sellal déclare: La situation dans la région impose davantage de coordination," *Radio Algérienne*, 9/3/2017, accessed on 10/1/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3WT8iuF>

114 See for example a report by Radio France Internationale: "Les propos d'un responsable marocain sur la Kabylie fâchent l'Algérie," *RFI*, 19/7/2021, accessed on 10/1/2023 at: <https://bit.ly/3ZmoExO>

to strategic distance. Since 2020, periodic failures have emerged from irreconcilable visions for governance among Tunisian actors. Street confrontations, especially in 2020-2021, galvanized by politicians' polarizing stances have been decidedly about domestic issues, especially economic decay, and the future of Ennahda – not only its political role, but its very existence as a unified movement. The Tunisian president's suspension of the constitution in July 2021 effectively sidelined the opposition role of Ghannouchi.<sup>115</sup>

Tunisia's North African audience has been a close observer of its domestic affairs given that this audience had its homegrown version of ideological/religious mobilization.<sup>116</sup> In reaction to the July 2021 constitutional shock, North African audiences took clear positions. Later that month, Tunisia's president received Morocco's foreign minister, in a show of Moroccan support for Tunisia's politics.<sup>117</sup> A few days later, Algeria and Egypt issued a joint statement supporting Tunisia's president in the battle against Ghannouchi.<sup>118</sup> Their collective preference and expectation are for stability in Tunisian regional politics.<sup>119</sup>

## In Lieu of Concluding

Tunisia's transient change in foreign policy after 2011 allows for an observation of how ideas and personalities (as domestic-level factors) matter in foreign policy role formation and practice. Yet, this phase also provides a powerful confirmation of how regional imperatives have exerted influence on such roles. With such findings, the article supports the body of literature highlighting RT's potential to explain agent-structure dynamics.<sup>120</sup> Tunisia's politicized foreign policy went against the felt interests of *all* regional states. Tunisia, especially given its fragile transition, could not afford such entanglements.

This article has demonstrated the importance of regional audiences in defining foreign policy roles, while showing how these roles also have a domestic component. Diverging from established approaches to Tunisian foreign policy, it explained why regional audience expectations had significantly more influence in defining Tunisian foreign policy than idiosyncratic personalities, regime type, or ideological commitments. The article further found that regional expectations persisted and were filtered via two different forms of domestic political settings: exclusionary and transitional. The "strategic distance" concept captured a phenomenon whereby stability-seeking and legalist foreign policies, the combination of which *could be* associated with democratic regimes (and peaceful regional orders), derived mainly from conflict-related pressures that influenced foreign policy choices of exclusionary, as well as democratically elected, governments. We believe this to be an important finding which merits further analysis especially in studies on regional orders (or regional security complexes) and regionalism, as the process of society building at the regional level pushes towards pacification of the regional order.

115 Mohammed Fawzi, *Aggravated Crises: Dimensions of the Wave of Resignations inside Tunisia's Ennahda*, Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies, 29/9/2021, accessed on 10/1/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3VVYezK>

116 Nizar Bou-Lihya, "The Tunisia Crisis: What Implications on Maghrebi States?" *Al-Quds Al-Arabi*, 2/2/2021, accessed on 10/1/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3VP2xgo>

117 The visit was on 27 July 2021. See: Hadeel Hilal, "Moroccan Foreign Minister Hands a Letter from the King to the Tunisian President," *al-Shurouq*, 27/7/2021, accessed on 10/1/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3GOsF6G>

118 See the Egyptian foreign ministry statement on 1 August 2021: Samar Nasr, "Foreign Ministry: Egypt trusts the wisdom and ability of the Tunisian Presidency to overcome this crisis," *Bawwab al-Ahram*, 1/8/2021, accessed on 10/1/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3XgThTg>

119 Tunisian predictability becomes more necessary given Turkey's regional interventions. Heba Saleh, "Egypt Threatens Military Action in Libya if Turkish-Backed Forces Seize Sirte," *Financial Times*, 21/6/2020, accessed on 10/1/2023, at: <https://on.ft.com/3WT4vhh>

120 Wehner & Thies, "Leader Influence in Role Selection Choices."

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