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# THE GLOBAL AND LOCAL RE-PACKAGING AND MARKETING OF A “MODERATE” ISLAMIST LEADER

*Mohamed-Salah Omri, University of Oxford*

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In Tunisia, the resigning former Prime Minister and Al Nahda leader, Hamadi Jebali, is being groomed for a presidential role by his party as well as international players, in a bid to market an “acceptable” Islamism.



In specialist lingo, terms such as re-packaging and marketing denote processes and procedures, and do not necessarily carry value judgment. Modern politics has been deeply commercialized and is often spoken about in business terms. Revolutionary and idealist as Tunisia may be, the country’s electoral politics is no exception to this rule. Mr. Hamadi Jebali, former Prime Minister of the Tunisian Interim government is becoming emblematic of this process. His visit to the UK this week, with a day stop in Oxford, where he gave a

public lecture and met with people in the newly founded Blavatnik Oxford School of Government and others, reveals the global side of the process of self-presentation and marketing in place in relation to political Islam, Arab revolutions and Tunisia. It is natural for a school modeled after the Kennedy School of Government in Harvard in the US to “prepare” leaders and for it to connect with a wider project of supporting, and even creating, a “moderate Islam, which has been in place for several years now. The field is indeed open

and the Arab region can be considered an ideal laboratory for thinking and action designed to direct and test new theories in leadership and influence. But why Hamadi Jebali and how?

Much of the emerging persona, called Hamadi Jebali, can be gleaned from his lecture in Oxford and the subsequent interaction in the university, both in substance and in form, in addition to a quick overview of his career so far. Jebali constructs a narrative and presents a profile, which need to be noted and thought about. For in both there are high stakes for the ties between Western governments and institutions and Islamist parties in power in Tunisia and in Egypt in particular, as well as stakes for these countries as a whole.

Jebali presented a narrative based on two key premises: revision and compromise. It goes something like this. Tunisian history shows that identity was at the very heart of the first rupture in modern Tunisia. The short of it is that Habib Bourguiba's project was "laïque", in the sense that it was against religion, and was built on the ruins of the Old Destour Party led by Tha'alibi in the 1920s and 30s, which was sympathetic to Islam and Arab identity. Bourguiba then went on to do some good things, like education and the liberation of women; but he consolidated individual rule and regional imbalance. Ben Ali added corruption to this mix. As far as the revolution is concerned, Tunisia is lucky because it did not have a revolution in the classical sense. But the social revolution, which turned political, was then "kidnapped" by the elite. Throughout the transitional process, Nahda was consensual and compromising but other forces were not. These include mainly the main trade union, UGTT, which in the words of Jebali played a "negative role". Complicating matters was the rise of Salafi movements, which were alien to the country but thrived in a climate of freedom. Interestingly, Jebali talks about religious Salafis and Leftist Salafism. From this complicated picture, emerges a voice which called for a

rethink and the need to bring in more parties, building wider consensus and enacting speedy economic measures, even if this went against the dominant current and thinking of his own party. And this is what led, in this narrative, to the emergence of Jebali the "statesman". When such vision proved not possible, he resigned.

His narrative of historic plurality, moderation and openness (Geography, he says explains politics), shows that the future of Tunisia must consist in: building a "historic block", made up of the moderate parties - liberals, Islamists and others; rejection of violence and a consensual government over the next five years. If all goes according to plan, we should expect this programme to appear as the electoral platform for Jebali's presidential campaign. Such campaign is already underway, it seems.

Along with this narrative, and despite its contradictions and outright inaccuracy, the contours of an image of Jebali is being drawn and marketed. He is the independently minded politician, despite being at the leadership of Al-Nahda. He stands clearly against the "Protection of the revolution law" supported by his party and CPR, the Interim President's party and designed to punish old regime people collectively. He is also against Salafi violence. He appears modern and even modernizing, open, tolerant, dresses professionally, gives his attention to interlocutors, whether they are young students, men or women; and accepting of his critics in the audience and presumably elsewhere as well. Stories of his prison ordeal are used to a minimum, and only to show that they made him stronger, wiser and more compassionate; a man who was repressed, mistreated and tortured but who holds no grudges. His advisors, and here is where one needs to look for the science of marketing and image-creation, are not his former cabinet appointees, Lotfi Zitoun and other Al-Nahda insiders. They are slick, western educated and western-based academics and entrepreneurs, in addition to foreign academics and politicians.

At home, news of Jebali seeking the counsel of former regime leaders, like Hamid Karoui and Tayeb Baccouche, are no longer a secret. Advisors present him as experienced, independent, and clear in his positions, deeply devoted to Tunisia's future and not easy to manipulate by his party. Some of these advisers themselves stand a distance from al-Nahda. No wonder then that the initiative, Lead the Way, may see in him its test case and prominent product at the same time. The Tunisian newspaper Attounisiyya reported on 13 May 2013 that Jebali's name has been floated as possible Honorary President of an Institute to train leaders of the future, and which is a joint venture between the universities of Oxford, Virginia and others, and possibly funded by the African Development Bank. News about Lead the Way is still sketchy.

When Jebali's name was linked to the presidency during the Oxford debate, he neither denied nor confirmed the news. Building expectations and "desire" for a product, and keeping "consumers" interested are part of the game. From it will emerge the next leadership material whose weight and potential will have been tested in the laboratories of leadership schools, think tanks and among generous donors and focus groups. That's how modern Western politics works. The entry of Hamadi Jebali on the presidential scene becomes only a matter of timing, as marketing specialists would say. Internally of course, al-Nahda owes him and his advisers a great debt of gratitude. He managed to suck the anger out of a street in revolt and prevent the collapse of Al-Nahda-led government in the aftermath of the assassination of Shokri Belaïd in early February 2013. He succeeded in resurrecting both, his party and himself, in a country where their control was rapidly deteriorating. All along, that same party has been learning how strategize; and the new Jebali is part of that strategic learning.

All of this of course assumes that winds will blow in the right direction. But these rarely do, as the old Arab proverb teaches us. The trials and tribulations of post-revolution Tunisia are getting more complicated and perhaps more unpredictable than any marketing strategy can control. Resurgent old players, in the shape of well-entrenched and diverse opposition, and new forces, in the guise of violent Salafis, may not have been factored in properly; nor has been the decay in trust and hope that has afflicted Tunisia over the last two years under Al Nahda's own watch. In addition, Jebali's own party is being eroded and may not back him fully. Despite all the global and local marketing effort, Jebali may well end up being a product past its "sell by" date come the next elections. ❄️