

# Tunisia - Opposing political Islam: Mohamed Brahmi's widow speaks out

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**On the first anniversary of Mohamed Brahmi's assassination, his widow denounces fundamentalism and terrorism in Tunisia. In memory of her husband, a left-wing politician, Mbarka Brahmi urges Tunisians not to support the Ennahdha party in the autumn elections, and appeals for peace.**

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Mbarka Brahmi, 47, mother of five, has become a key spokesperson for the fight against fundamentalism and terror in Tunisia since the assassination of her husband Mohamed Brahmi exactly one year ago at their Tunis home on 25 July 2013. Sometimes known as "Widow Courage", along with Basma Belaid, wife of another slain Tunisian anti-fundamentalist Chokri Belaid, in this interview Mbarka Brahmi describes her late husband's life, struggles and death.

At the time of his murder, Mohamed Brahmi was a member of the Tunisian Constituent Assembly, the body elected after the revolution in October 2011 to draft a new constitution. Born, like the revolution, in the Sidi Bouzid region, and from a poor, rural background, Mohamed Brahmi studied economics before founding what was meant to be a socialist and secularist "People's Movement" in 2011. He later resigned from the movement after other leaders drifted close to Ennahdha, the then-ruling fundamentalist party. Both a left-leaning Nasserist and a devout Muslim, he launched a new party called the Popular Current in July 2013 shortly before his death.

Brahmi's killing, in earshot of his wife and children, sent shock waves across Tunisia, provoking a political crisis and popular protests by what became the Irhal (get out!) campaign that eventually led to Ennahdha's ouster. Given that only last week Tunisia weathered the biggest losses its army has suffered since independence in a jihadist attack near the Algerian border that killed fifteen, and in light of worrying developments across the region, remembering Mohamed Brahmi and supporting Mbarka Brahmi's battle for tolerance and peace has never been more critical.

## **Karima Bennoune: Why was Mohamed Brahmi targeted, in your opinion?**

Mbarka Brahmi: He was targeted both for reasons linked to Tunisian politics and to international relations. In Tunisia, he believed the Ennahdha movement has nothing to do with Islam as a religion, but instead represents political Islam. They exploit Islam to have the sympathy of the people. He said that in the Constituent Assembly. He said Ennahdha took power thanks to "political money." If it was not for the money flowing to Ennahdha from Qatar and Turkey, the results of the 23 October 2011 elections would have been different. While denouncing the Islamists, Mohamed was a Hajj. He prayed every day in the mosque of the Constituent Assembly. But, his Islam was not for profit. He was Muslim in his house and in his heart, not through his political party. At the international level,

he always said that the Muslim Brotherhood is the “big stick” of colonialism. That which colonialism was not able to achieve, it used the Muslim Brotherhood to complete.

**KB: In your opinion, what was the significance of the assassination of your husband for Tunisia?**

MB: The killing of Chokri Belaid in February 2013 was a trial run. People went out to protest afterwards, but once they buried Chokri Belaid they went back to their homes with sadness. However, with the assassination of Mohammed Brahmi, Tunisians knew that a serial drama of assassinations had begun. It was as though a catastrophe hit the country. How can those who say they are defending Islam, kill a Haj who prays with them?

My husband’s assassination was a wake up call. The struggle is not between Muslims and non-Muslims, nor is it between believer and non-believer. Islam is our religion, our culture. However, our Islam is a moderate and a particular Islam. In Tunisia we do not accept that the Islam of other societies be applied here because we have our own Islam which is consistent with the specificity of our society. For example, in Tunisia, you cannot tell a man without a beard that he is a kafir (non-believer). Islam does not mean that a woman must wear a niqab (veil covering everything but the eyes). We in Tunisia are not used to these things. Our society will not get used to them.

Tunisians knew that they were all targeted by the assassination of Mohammed Brahmi. This explains why on 25 July 2013 people flocked in the thousands to protest in Bardo Square, where the Constituent Assembly meets. That was how the “departure” (rahil) sit-in began, during which people demanded Ennahdha relinquish power. The sit-in continued until some of its goals were achieved. At least the Ennahdha movement was obliged to formally step down - although it had already planted its roots in both the administration and in security and military institutions in order to facilitate its eventual return. We insist on not having these people back in power. We insist on achieving other goals, like living with dignity and taking back our rights. But political money is still playing a role.

**KB: Some suspects have been arrested in relation to Mr. Brahmi’s assassination. What is your reaction to this?**

MB: One of those arrested was my neighbour, a young marginalized guy who did not finish his education. After the revolution he joined the Salafi movement like a lot of other young people who were brainwashed and bought. He is just someone who was hired and does not have any interest in killing Mohamed. Other parties have an interest in this. I want them to be prosecuted. However, there has been a big cover up. I know the murderers will not be discovered any time soon, because the group behind the killer is the one investigating, and is protected by the Tunisian state.

Twelve days before Mohamed’s assassination, the Ministry of the Interior received a document from the American security services warning that he was targeted, but they closed their eyes and left him to his murderers. Usually when such a document is received it is immediately forwarded to the head of government and the President. In this case, it was as if they did not know anything. One year later, there still has been no investigation about the letter. I want the truth.

**KB: To be clear, do you hold Ennahdha, which was in power at the time, responsible for your husband’s murder, whether directly or indirectly?**

MB: Yes. I was sure that Ennahdha was involved in the crime even before Mohamed took his last breath, while we were transporting him to the hospital. I was saying, “Ennahdha killed him.” Indeed, Ennahdha created a hostile environment. Their deputies in the Constituent Assembly - like Sahbi Atig and Habib Ellouze - were inciting people against him. Mohamed went on hunger strike at the

Constituent Assembly with fellow deputy Ahmed Al Khaskoussi for 24 days in support of socio-economic demands in Sidi Bouzid. They were harassed on the Assembly premises by Ennahdha deputies. Followers of Ennahdha even used violence against my husband in Bourguiba Avenue on two occasions.

**KB: In the west, the Ennahdha party is often labelled “moderate.” How do you feel when you hear this?**

MB: I laugh at those who think it is a moderate party - a moderate party that sometimes happens to kill people in front of their own homes. If this is modernism, what is terrorism? For me, the Ennahdha party is a terrorist party which violates the integrity of the citizen, and toys with the feelings of the people and with their Islam.

**KB: Can you describe what happened on 25 July 2013?**

MB: It was completely quiet outside, because it was a national holiday - Republic Day. It was Ramadan. Mohamed went out the front door and I heard shooting. I found him lying on his side, covered in blood. I saw the culprit walking calmly away from the scene toward a motorbike where a second man waited. I screamed to Adnane and Balkis, my oldest children who are in their twenties, to come outside, saying that they had killed him, Ennahdha had killed him. When my children arrived, Mohamed was still moving his eyes. So Adnane and Balkis held him and said, “Dad, say the shahada” (the profession of Muslim faith).

**KB: You became an activist after this tragic event, even speaking to thousands of protestors in front of the Constituent Assembly. What has your life been like in the year since?**

MB: It was the most difficult year in my life. In my family, I became both the mother and the father. With respect to my presence on the political scene, I do not like being under the spotlight, especially while some of my kids are still young. However, I have to make sure people hear from me what Ennahdha has done to me. All the families that lost their children should be able to speak, and they were from the poorer classes. They should be given the opportunity to be heard because new elections are being organized in October and November 2014. This way Tunisians will know - those who voted for Ennahdha last time - that they gave their vote to a gang of killers, and they will protect the country in the next election by not voting for this gang.

What I am asking for is that the world know that Ennahdha targeted all sectors of society. It targeted citizens such as Lotfi Naghdh in the south. It targeted the army. It targeted the security forces.

**KB: You received death threats yourself last spring. Has this continued?**

MB: No, it did not continue. However, to be under threat does not require that you receive threats every day. The state is supposed to provide protection, and there are guards in front of the house. But, they come one day and then do not return for ten days.

**KB: What is your analysis of the struggle against terrorism in Tunisia now?**

MB: Terrorism is now embedded in Tunisia. The state needs to attack the problem of terrorism at the root. It needs to make sure the mosques are neutral, because some spread a fundamentalist discourse. The Tunisian sheikhs have to organize programmes to educate young people, so they will not be attracted to religious extremism, so they will not think that either you are with me or I should kill you. The Prophet did not do this. The Prophet lived side by side with non-believers and with

Christians, and Jews, and he treated them well. In Tunisia now, according to the fundamentalists, if you do not agree with them about something, you should be killed. To counter this idea, we need to raise awareness by organizing conferences and seminars. Young people who were lured into terrorism need to be assisted, just like drug addicts, because the young fundamentalist is like a person addicted to drugs. He needs to be cured and reintegrated into the society.

There should be an international day to combat terrorism. In Tunisia this should be on Republic Day, July 25, the day that commemorates peaceful, republican and modern values. On that day last year, a civilized and educated Muslim person was assassinated. If terrorism hits me today, it will hit my neighbour, my brother and my friend tomorrow. We must put an end to political Islam, and prevent states from financing it.

**KB: Today, one year after the assassination of your husband Mohamed Brahmi, what are your hopes for the future of your children, and of Tunisia itself?**

MB: I wish for peace and security for Tunisia, because it is our only shelter. We are not used to hearing fundamentalist speeches, or to witnessing extremist practices like assassinations and terrorism. So, I hope Tunisia can be healed. The terrorists need to be prosecuted, but at the same time we need to give voice to a peaceful discourse, not one full of hate and revenge. We need a brilliant future for our kids - mine and those of all Tunisians.

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<https://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/karima-bennoune-mbarka-brahmi/opposing-political-islam-mohamed-brahmis-widow-speaks-out>

\* This interview is the first in a series on oD 50.50: Frontline Voices against Muslim fundamentalism

Karima Bennoune is the author of *Your Fatwa Does Not Apply Here: Untold Stories from the Fight Against Muslim Fundamentalism*. TED Talk: When people of Muslim heritage challenge fundamentalism.