Rethinking Political Inclusion Beyond Moderation: Strategic Relational Pluralization in Tunisian Islamist Politics

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Abstract

This article explores the complex dynamics shaping the integration of the Tunisian Islamist party Ennahdha into the instituted political game. Drawing on a strategic relational approach, the analysis highlights the simultaneous, mutually reactive, and often conflicting relationships of Ennahdha party with three types of actors: political secular forces (allied or antagonist), political and religious Salafi actors, and faith-based associations. Based on extensive field research and 33 in-depth interviews conducted with key players involved, we propose to capture these dynamics at the macro (regime), meso (organizations), and micro levels, through the notion of strategic pluralization, by which we mean a reconfiguration of Ennahdha's relations with various Islamic actors under the pressure of secular forces. Going beyond institutional-structural approaches and monolithic interpretations of the Islamist constellation, we argue that Ennahdha's integration in relational economies has formed the basis of the party's strategy to secure its political inclusion in the post-revolutionary scene.

Keywords

Ennahdha – Tunisia – Islamism – Post-Islamism – Salafism, Moderation – strategic relational approach

Introduction*

The academic literature analyzing political dynamics in Tunisia since 2011 has largely focused on the rise to power of the Islamist party and the effects of its integration in the post-authoritarian political game. For a number of authors, the political inclusion of the Ennahdha party led to its progressive moderation and the abandonment of its Islamist agenda.[1] In particular, the party's decision, at its 10th Congress in 2016, to engage in a process of "specialization" (*takhasus*) in political action, has been presented as the "death" or "exit" of Islamist ideology, that is to say the death or exit of the project of overthrowing the social and political order. Ennahdha has accordingly been declared a "moderate" party.[2]

This transformation has been theorized by two strands of literature: the inclusion-moderation theory,[3] and the theory of post-Islamism.[4] Interestingly, the two theories overlap insofar as they both study the adaptation of Islamists to the new (post-revolutionary) structural conditions, i.e. authoritarian

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1 Anne Wolf, *Political Islam in Tunisia. The History of Ennahda* (Oxford University Press, 2017); Monica Marks, "Tunisia," in Shadi Hamid and William McCants, eds., *Rethinking Political Islam* (Oxford University Press, 2017): 32–53; Ramazan Yildirim, "Transformation of the Ennahda Movement from Islamic Jama'ah to Political Party," *Insight Turkey* 19: 2 (2017): 189–214.

2 Marc Lynch, "In Uncharted Waters: Islamist Parties Beyond Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, paper 293 (December 2016). Available at: https://carnegieendowment.org/files/CP_293_Lynch_Muslim_Brotherhood_Final.pdf; Yildirim (2017); Ester Sigillò, "Beyond the myth of the Tunisian exception: the open-ended tale of a fragile democratization," in Loretta Dell'Aguzzo and Emidio Diodato, eds., *The 'state' of pivot states in south-eastern Mediterranean: Turkey, Egypt, Israel, and Tunisia after the Arab Spring* (Perugia University Press, 2016), 95–121; see Théo Blanc, "Ennahdha et les salafistes: la construction relationnelle de la «modération»," *L'Année du Maghreb* 22 (2020): 149–167.

3 Jillian Schwedler, *Faith in Moderation. Islamist Parties in Jordan and Yemen* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 192–215; Jilian Schwedler, "Democratization, Inclusion and the Moderation of Islamist Parties, *Development* 50: 1 (2007): 56–61.

4 Roy, Olivier, *L'échec de l'islam politique* (Paris: Seuil, 1992).

openings (Jordan, Algeria and Tunisia in 1989, Egypt 1984, Morocco 1997), regime change (Tunisia and Egypt in 2011) or regime reform (Morocco and Jordan in 2011). However, the analysis of this adaptation remains focused on the evolution of political discourse and on the institutional dimension of Islamist parties. It thus overlooks the heterogeneity of Islamic actors as well as relational dynamics between the various actors composing the post-authoritarian setting.[5] Contributions to the inclusion-moderation literature that take into account this relational dimension also remain embedded in an institutionalist paradigm and limit themselves to cross-ideological cooperation at the expense of relations between ideologically proximate actors. Hence the question raised by this article: beyond the vertical structural/institutionalist approach of the moderation and post-Islamism theories, how have the multilateral horizontal relationships with various socio-political forces informed and shaped Ennahdha's long-standing strategy of political integration?

Drawing on a strategic relational approach,[6] we argue that Ennahdha's integration in relational economies has formed the basis of the party's strategy to secure its political inclusion in the post-revolutionary scene. These relational economies, which are simultaneous, mutually reactive, and often conflicting, encompass three types of actors around Ennahdha: socio-political secular forces (allied or antagonist), political and religious Salafi actors, and faith-based associations. As a pivot actor in politics, religion, and government, Ennahdha indeed constitutes a focal point around which various actors revolve and thus crystallizes a multilateral rapport de force. Ennahdha's political integration has accordingly relied on a *strategic pluralization* of its relations with various actors distributed over of the political, religious, and associative fields as a mechanism to adapt to the evolving power balance.

As such, this article proposes a complementary approach to the inclusion-moderation and post-Islamist theories which tend to focus on institutional

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5 Fabio Merone, Ester Sigillò and Damiano De Facci, "Nahda and Tunisian Islamic activism," in Akbarzadeh S. and Dara Conduit (eds.), *New Opposition in the Middle East* (Singapore: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016), 95–121.

6 McGarry, A., Davidson, R. J., Accornero, G., Jasper, J. M., and Duyvendak, J. W, "Players and arenas: strategic interactionism in social movements studies," *Social Movement Studies* 15: 6 (2016): 634–642; Frédéric Volpi and Jasper, J. M., eds., *Microfoundations of the Arab uprisings: Mapping interactions between regimes and protesters* (Amsterdam University Press, 2017); Frédéric Volpi and Janine A. Clark, "Activism in the Middle East and North Africa in times of upheaval: social networks' actions and interactions," *Social Movement Studies* 18:1 (2019): 1–16.

arrangements and their resulting "moderation" effects,[7] or to restrict the relational dimension to bilateral Islamist-secularist interactions. It also allows us to overcome a dualist interpretation (secularists vs Islamists) of a much more parcellated field of actors and to adopt a diachronic approach in order to grasp the historical dynamics at play behind Ennahdha's political integration.

Accordingly, the article is chronologically structured. It identifies the main political moments that have influenced Ennahdha's strategy of political integration to grasp the shifting and conflictual character of the party's interactive dynamics. The first section lays out the article's theoretical approach and anchorage in the academic literature. The second section puts Ennahdha's quest for political integration and relations with the regime and opposition actors in its historical context (1980–2010) and examines its legacy on constitutional negotiations (2012–2014). The third section investigates the ways Ennahdha has dealt with the pluralization of Islamic actors after the revolution (2011–2013), in particular Salafis and faith-based associations. The two following sections analyze the turning point of the 2013–2014 political crisis and the subsequent reconfiguration of the political and religious fields (2014–2018). A sixth section explores the emergence of new actors after the 2019 elections and the ensuing reconfiguration of their relationships, until the interruption of the political process by President Kais Saied in July 2021. This article relies on extensive fieldwork research conducted by the three authors on party dynamics and electoral processes, Salafi movements, and Islamic associations and networks in Tunisia.

Studying Islamist Parties' Integration Dynamics Through a Strategic Relational Approach

Many scholars have sought to analyze the transformation of Islamist parties in relation to the process of their integration in the instituted political game, highlighting in particular a change in their ideology, i.e. a weakening of the religious foundations of their political project. According to the 'inclusion-moderation' theory, the participation of Islamists in institutional politics results in their progressive moderation, while their repression leads to radicalization.[8] A number of scholars underlined the vagueness of the notion of moderation,

7 Carrie R. Wickham, "Interests, ideas, and Islamist outreach in Egypt," in Quintan Wiktorowicz, ed., *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press.2004), 231–249.

8 Schwedler (2006, 2007); Wiktorowicz (2004).

leading some of its proponents to distinguish between tactical/procedural and ideological/substantive moderation.[9] Others have emphasized that the "moderation" thesis is primarily embedded in an institutional approach to political inclusion.[10] Consequently, the moderation necessary for inclusion in the political game could be limited to the compliance with the rules of political pluralism and electoral competition and would not imply a renunciation of religious-political ideology. Moreover, proponents of the inclusion-moderation-nexus "have measured the ideology of Islamist groups against the yardstick of liberal democracy," assuming that the moderation of Islamists, thanks to their integration into the institutional political game, is necessary for the advancement of the democratization process.[11] Thus, the notion of moderation was also criticized as a political category that suffers from a normative bias.[12]

The second framework of analysis of Islamist parties' political transformation is the theory of post-Islamism. Originally proposed by Asef Bayat about the changing face of Islamism in Iran, post-Islamism refers to the "exhaustion of the symbols and sources of legitimacy of Islamism"[13] and the weakening of the political role of religion.[14] This thesis was later taken up by Olivier Roy, who had already argued in 1992 that the move of Islamists to formal politics entails the "failure" of the Islamist ideological and political project (creation of an Islamic state implementing sharia law) and its evolution towards a conservative democratic agenda.[15] Instead, post-Islamism is defined by an important retraction of the place of religion in politics – though not secularization – and

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9 Jillian Schwedler, "Islamists In Power? Inclusion, Moderation, and the Arab Uprisings," *Middle East Development Journal* 5:1 (2013); Karakaya, S., and Yildirim, A. K., "Islamist moderation in perspective: comparative analysis of the moderation of Islamist and Western communist parties," *Democratization* 20: 7 (2017): 1322–1349.

10 Annette Ranko, *The Muslim Brotherhood and its Quest for Hegemony in Egypt: State-Discourse and Islamist Counter-Discourse* (Springer, 2014), 29.

11 Günes M. Tezcür, "The Moderation Theory Revisited. The Case of Islamic Political Actors," *Party Politics*, 16: 1 (2010): 69–88.

12 Jillian Schwedler, "Can Islamists Become Moderates? Rethinking the Inclusion-Moderation Hypothesis," *World Politics* 63: 2 (2011): 347–376; Alia Gana, "L'intégration politique des islamistes. Perspective critique de la thèse de "l'inclusion-modération"," *L'Année du Maghreb* 22 (2020): 11–22.

13 Asef Bayat, "The coming of a post-Islamist Society," *Critique: Journal for Critical Studies of the Middle East* 5: 9 (1996): 46.

14 Myriam Aït-Aoudia, "Idéologie et religion dans les partis islamistes contemporains," *L'Année du Maghreb* 22 (2020): 223–230.

15 Olivier Roy, "Le post-islamisme," *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée* 85–86 (1999): 11–30.

the acceptance of democratic pluralism.[16] In Bayat's words, post-Islamism "strives to marry Islam with individual choice and freedom, with democracy and modernity."[17] Authors subscribing to this theory have described Ennahdha as the "most prominent example of […] post-Islamism."[18]

The proponents of the theory of post-Islamism and the theory of inclusion-moderation tend to base their analysis mainly on the changes in the discourse of leaders or representatives of Islamist parties and their practices in the institutional political field.[19] Indeed, institutional approaches to the transformations of Islamist parties generally pay little attention to the social anchorage of these parties, to the different spaces in which they deploy their actions, and to the relations and interactions they develop, especially with other groups or organizations of a religious nature. Yet, as Stacey Philbrick Yadav notes, "Islamists are […] fundamentally relational actors" which are "embedded in relationships with a wide range of interlocutors." Accordingly, Islamists cannot be "isolated from the networks of relations in which they decide, act, and argue."[20]

Several contributions to the inclusion-moderation literature have highlighted the structural bias of the inclusion-moderation thesis and have incorporated a relational dimension in the analysis. They propose a broader analytical approach encompassing the interactions that Islamist parties develop, not only with the state, but also with all social and political forces.[21] For example, Browers advanced the "cooperation-moderation hypothesis" according to which moderation stems from cooperation with other ideological forces such as the secular left.[22] While acknowledging the institutionalist bias of

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16 Roy, Ibid.

17 Asef Bayat, *Making Islam Democratic: Social Movements and the Post-Islamist Turn* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 11.

18 Francesco Cavatorta and Stefano Torelli, "From Victim to Hangman? *Ennahda*, Salafism and the Tunisian Transition," *Religions* 12: 2 (2021): 76; see also Asef Bayat, ed., *Post-Islamism. The Changing Faces of Political Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 27.

19 Aït-Aoudia (2020).

20 Stacey P. Yadav, "Progressive Problemshift or Paradigmatic Degeneration? Approaches to Islamism Since 2011," in Marc Lynch, ed., *Rethinking Islamist Politics* (Washington, DC: Project on Middle East Political Science, 2014), 57.

21 Schwedler (2011); Wickam (2013); Ranko (2014); see the special issue coordinated by Hendrik Kratzschmar, "The Dynamics of Opposition Cooperation in the Arab World," *British Journal of Middle East Studies* 38: 3 (2011): 287–434.

22 Michaelle L. Browers, *Political Ideology in the Arab World: Accommodation and Transformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 9.

the inclusion-moderation theory and calling to take into consideration other factors such as cross-ideological coalitions,[23] these authors are still embedded in an institutionalist framework insofar as they argue that such coalitions occur as a result of institutional inclusion.[24] Schwedler notably writes that cooperation between Islamists and leftists is "a form of moderation that is an important effect of inclusion."[25] In addition, most authors have focused on the bilateral relations between "Islamists" and "secularists" at the expense of relations between ideologically proximate actors.[26] One case at hand is Wickham's study of the power balance between the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and secularist forces which does not integrate other Islamist and Salafi movements in the balance.[27]

Other authors taking their distance vis-à-vis the inclusion-moderation literature proposed a more complex picture, describing how the Tunisian Islamist party Ennahda found itself under the "double pressure" of two blocks, the "secularists" and the "Islamic public."[28] Recent works focused on how the successful political integration of "Islamist parties is related to interactions inside the Islamist spectrum."[29] A similar argument was put forward by contributors of the post-Islamist theory who argued that the notion of post-Islamism "can be employed to understand intra-Islamist competition."[30] Others theorized the heterogeneous relations handled by the Ennahda party with other Islamic forces rooted in the social fabric.[31] This echoes Wickham's invitation to pay more attention to the different activities deployed by Islamist organizations and the resources they devote to them.[32]

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23 Tezcür (2010); Güneş M. Tezcür, *Muslim Reformers in Iran and Turkey. The Paradox of Moderation* (University of Texas Press, 2010).

24 Schewdler (2013), 8.

25 Schwedler (2006).

26 Kraetzschmar, ed. (2011); Blanc (2020).

27 Carrie R. Wickham, *The Muslim Brotherhood. Evolution of an Islamist Movement* (Princeton University Press, 2013); see also Jilian Schwedler and Janine A. Clark, "Islamist-Leftist Cooperation in the Arab World," *isim Review* 18 (2006): 10–11.

28 Merone et al. (2016).

29 Jasmin Lorch and Hatem Chakroun, "Othering within the Islamist Spectrum: Ennahda and the Political Salafists in Tunisia," *Middle East Law and Governance* 12:2 (2020): 200.

30 Cavatorta and Torelli (2021), 2.

31 Ester Sigillò, "Ennahdha et l'essor des associations islamiques en Tunisie: revendiquer l'islam politique au-delà de la dimension partisane?," *L'Année du Maghreb* 22 (2020b): 113–129.

32 Wickam (2004).

Drawing on academic studies highlighting the 'multidimensional character' of the Islamist movement,[33] this article provides an important empirical contribution by broadening the analysis of the range of relationships handled by the Ennahda's party in its pursuit of political integration. We thus answer Schwedler's call to expand our focus beyond Islamist groups to examine a broader range of political actors."[34] To do so, we rely on the concept of "strategic action fields" proposed by Fligstein and McAdam, namely socially constructed *arenas* within which actors with varying resources and endowments vie for advantage.[35] Taking a relational approach as an analytical tool implies the analysis of "fields of interactions" rather than the investigation of the relationship between structure and agents.[36] In doing so, this article scrutinizes the multi-level analysis of interactions that Ennahdha's activists handle at the macro-level (as a public actor seeking institutional legalization), the meso-level (as a political party in power), and the micro-level (as a social movement).

At the methodological level, this relational and multilevel approach relies on document analysis of the political and institutional settings (reports, legal texts, party manifestos, etc.) and 33 in-depth interviews with Ennahdha party members, Salafi activists, representatives of left-wing parties, and associational actors linked to Ennahdha or close to secular-left opposition forces (such as feminist associations) conducted by the authors between May 2016 and January 2020 (see table 1). This approach, combined with a historical-chronological perspective, allows for a comprehensive analysis of Ennahdha's political integration at the level of institutional polity and politics, interactions between parties and organizations, and the trajectories and circulation of individual activists.

The Search for Recognition and Political Integration: Between Confrontation and Cooperation (1970–2010)

Ennahdha's emergence as a major player on the Tunisian political scene after 2011 appeared as a paradox given that the party did not participate in

33 Ibid.

34 Schwedler (2011), 372; see also Schwedler (2013), 15.

35 Neil Fligstein and Doug McAdam, *A Theory of Fields* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 10–12.

36 James Jasper, "A strategic approach to collective action: Looking for agency in social-movement choices," *Mobilization: An International Quarterly* 9: 1 (2004): 1–16.

Table 1 Typology of Interviewees[37]

Actors	Number	Location	Date
Ennahdha party members and leaders	3	Tunis	2016–2019
Jabhat al-Islah leaders	5	Tunis, Ben Arous, Carthage	April-May 2018, January 2020
Religious-based associational members (charitable and da'wa associations)	10	Tunis, Siliana Sfax, Medenine	2016–2019
Secular women rights associations (atfd,[38] **Mouwatinet,**[39] **Majida Boulila)**[40]	6	Tunis, Sfax	May-June 2019
President and members of the Colibe commission	4		
Left-wing and other secular activists	5	Tunis, Sfax	May-June 2019

the popular uprisings that led to Ben Ali's ousting.[41] This paradox needs to be understood in connection with the varying strategies deployed by the Islamist movement in order to gain its recognition and its integration into the political game. It has first to do with the nature of the relations that the movement has maintained with the ruling power since its emergence as a political organization in 1981. It should also be considered in light of the evolving relationships and interactions of the Islamist formation with left-wing political groups and

37 In order to protect the anonymity of our informants and in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the erc-funded project Political and socio-institutional change in North Africa. Competition of models and diversity of national trajectories (tarica), the names of interviewees are not explicitly mentioned in the text, unless they are public figures.

38 Association tunisienne des femmes démocrates.

39 Association des femmes citoyennes, Sfax.

40 Association Majida Boulila pour la modernité, Sfax.

41 Bendana, K. (2012). Le parti *Ennahdha* à l'épreuve du pouvoir en Tunisie. *Confluences Méditerranée*, 82, 189–204. Bendana indicates that the Ennhadha party has played no role in the unrest that shook the country between December 2010 and January 2011 and has refrained from taking any official position on the events. She adds that the few leaders and activists who spoke out (on El Jazeera in particular) expressed the idea that the weakening of the regime could be a loophole to use to negotiate with Ben Ali.

other civil society organizations that embodied the opposition to the authoritarian regime before 2011.

An Ambivalent Attitude Towards the Ruling Regime

Contrary to a widespread idea, the history of Ennahdha has not been marked only by confrontation with the ruling power, but also by accommodations, compromises, and transactions, notably under Ben Ali's regime.[42] It is important to recall here that the emergence of the Islamist movement in the '70s took place in a context marked by a crisis within the ruling party and the rise of leftist/Marxist movements, which at the time constituted the main opposition to Bourguiba's regime. Confronted with the rise of criticism within the party and a left-wing opposition denouncing the absence of democracy and the authoritarian abuses of the regime,[43] the government saw the emergence of an Islamist current[44] as an opportunity to counter the left-wing opposition.[45] The Islamist current, on its part, mostly antagonized the leftists and did not yet confront the state.

This mutual tolerance between the Islamist movement and the government first came to light during the violent conflict which opposed the labor union and the regime in 1978, during which the Islamists backed the government against the workers and the left-wing movement, marking its evolution towards a politically oriented organization.[46] According to Alaya Allani, "The Islamists attributed the vandalism and violence of the confrontation to the union and the leftists, whom they regard(ed) as the traditional enemy of the Islamic Movement."[47]

This ambivalent attitude towards the regime was further expressed following the repression targeting the Islamist current in the 1990s, when the leadership in exile took the decision to revise its confrontational approach to

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42 Alaya Allani, "The Islamists in Tunisia between confrontation and participation: 1980–2008," *The Journal of North African Studies* 14: 2 (2009): 257– 272; Haoues Seniguer, "Les islamistes à l'épreuve du printemps arabe et des urnes: une perspective critique," *L'Année du Maghreb* viii (2012): 67–86.

43 Allani (2009).

44 Al Jamaa al Islamiyya (the 'Islamic Group') was founded in 1972 by Rachid Ghannouchi. In 1981 it became the 'Movement of the Islamic Tendency' (mti), and in 1989 it changed its name into "the Ennahdha Movement."

45 Bendana (2012); Wolf (2017), 39.

46 Sigillò (2016). This position in favor of the government was publicly expressed in the Islamic group's magazine Al-Maarifa, which "attributed the vandalism and violence of the confrontation to the labor union and the leftists, whom they regard as the traditional enemy of the Islamic Movement" (Allani 2009).

47 Allani (2009), "The Islamists in Tunisia…", *op. cit.*

embrace one of reconciliation with the ruling power;[48] while the jailed and repressed militants at home, angered by the political ambitions of the leadership that had cost them the repression, pushed for a retreat to social and religious activism.[49]

If the position adopted by Ennahdha in the early 2000s did not immediately lead to its official integration into the political game, it nevertheless illustrated the new priorities of the Ennahdha movement, namely the renunciation of a strategy of rupture with the ruling power in order to preserve the possibilities of a dialogue with Ben Ali's regime. According to Geisser and Gobe, "the process of normalization of Ennahdha's Islamists towards the regime dates back to the early 2000s, when a number of 'signs of appeasement' were issued on both sides." In fact, "since 2001, the party (was) engaged in a process of 'discreet normalization,' whose undeclared objective (was) a negotiated return to the national political scene" […] this line of compromise with the regime of Ben Ali, which was until now secret, if not discreet, becomes, with the 8th Congress, the official position of the movement."[50] In concrete terms, Ennahdha admits the principle of an extension of the mandate of Ben Ali as president of the Tunisian Republic in return for its official recognition. These "collusive transactions"[51] with the ruling political power confirm that Ennahdha's long term strategy has been to integrate itself into the official political game. Thus, despite the repression suffered by the Islamist movement, especially after the deadly attack attributed to current Ennahdha party leaders,[52] its relations with the ruling power were always ambivalent and made, at the same time, of periods of violent confrontation and collusion.

Interactions with Left-Wing and Human Rights Activists' Opposition Forces

The ambivalent stance of the Islamist organization with the regime does not however exclude interactions, or even joint mobilizations with left-wing political forces and civil society organizations, notably the Tunisian League for Human Rights (ltdh). Indeed, in the 2000s, after a decade of harsh repression

48 Rory McCarthy (2018), *Inside Tunisia's* Ennahda, *op. cit.*, 78–80.

49 Rory McCarthy (2018), "When Islamists Lose…", op. cit., 374.

50 Ibid.

51 Vincent Geisser & Éric Gobe (2008), « Un si long règne... Le régime de Ben Ali vingt ans après », *L'Année du Maghreb*, iv | 2008, 347–381.

52 During the last two years of the Bourguiba era, some mti members were accused of bombing hotels in the coastal cities, threatening Tunisia's vital tourism industry. In early 1991, some Ennahdha members allegedly attacked an rcd office in Tunis, killing one civilian and throwing acid in the faces of others.

against most opposition forces, a rapprochement occurred between the Islamist movement and the leftist and democratic forces. In 2001, the party took some steps to establish a dialogue with the liberal opposition (Ennahdha congress of April 2001). Ennahdha also participated in the "Appel de Tunis" of June 17, 2003, which was signed by representatives of political parties, associations and independent personalities, including, in addition to members of the Islamist party, the leaders of the Congrès pour la République (cpr), Moncef Marouzki, and the Democratic Forum for Work and Freedoms (Ettakatol), Mustapha Ben Jaafar.[53] The dialogue initiated by Ennhadha with the liberal opposition forces, which led the Islamist party to make some concessions on the issue of individual freedoms and women's rights,[54] was concretized by its participation in the October 18, 2005 *Collectif*. The latter regrouped "different opposition members: leftists, unionists, socialists – all of whom claimed the need for more liberty for the media and more freedom in political life."[55] The end of the 2000s was indeed marked by increased repression against left-wing parties and independent organizations, including legal ones, which refused allegiance to the presidential power (pdp,[56] pcot,[57] cpr,[58] fdtl,[59] and Ettajdid)[60] and any accommodation with the authoritarian regime, and rejected Ben Ali's project of "consensual democracy."

In line with this dynamic of cooperation between the Islamists and the left-wing opposition, another rapprochement took place during the same period with the Tunisian League for the Defense of Human Rights (ltdh), which has allowed several Islamist activists to reach leading positions within the organization. Indeed, in the face of harsh state repression (in the 1990s), the Islamist party was driven to embrace a human rights discourse that focused primarily on public freedoms and political rights, and significantly less on individual

53 According to Marzouki, it is this "agreement that established both the Troika [coalition government 2011–2013] and most of the Constitution." This should be nuanced, however, given that the Appel de Tunis did not set up a common political platform. Interview with Moncef Marzouki, Tunis, 14 and 16/08/2019; see also Moncef Marzouki, *L'invention d'une démocratie, les leçons de l'expérience tunisienne*, Paris, La Découverte, 2013, 79. Cited in Blanc (2020).

54 Mohamed Shabi Khalfaoui, *Arab Reform Initiative*, Research Paper, 27 September 2018. https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/tunisia-human-rights-organizations-political-islam-and-its-groups/.

55 Allani (2009).

56 Parti Démocrate Progressiste.

57 Parti Communiste des Ouvriers de Tunisie.

58 Congrès Pour la République.

59 Forum Démocratique pour le Travail et les Libertés.

60 Former Tunisian Communist Party.

liberties.[61] As underlined by Mohamed Sahbi Khalfaoui, it is a context of considerable narrowing of the space of expression and protest for all opposition forces, including human rights activists, that cooperation was established between Ennahdha and the ltdh, particularly in the form of support committees for Islamist political prisoners and international awareness campaigns conducted in the name of the defense of human rights. In Khalfaoui's words, the ltdh had been indeed engaged in defending "the rights of all political and human rights activists, without discrimination due to ideological or political affiliation."[62]

However, while the rapprochement with the opposition democratic forces and the constitution of a "democratic front" with the other legal (pdp and fdlt) and extra-legal (cpr and pcot) political parties were presented as Ennhahda's official line, the unofficial line embraced the idea of a "reintegration" plan within the authoritarian system in place.[63] Indeed, Ennahdha remained committed to pursuing its strategy of dialogue with the regime with a view to its official recognition.[64] Henceforth, the promotion of a "democratic front" uniting opposition forces, in which Ennahdha was involved since 2005, "if not completely abandoned, becomes secondary to the desire for normalization with the regime."[65] This stance of collaborative dialogue with the regime adopted by Ennahdha's leadership generated severe criticism from representatives of the independent opposition, who saw in the medium term the risk of a "political pact" between conservative Islamists and the supporters of the authoritarian regime to the detriment of "democratic forces."

Therefore, what divided the 'secularist' opposition and the Islamist party at the time was not so much their societal and ideological project but their

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61 Khalfaoui (2018).

62 Ibid.

63 Geisser & Gobe (2008).

64 In 2007, this position was very clearly expressed by Rached Ghanouchi, who no longer refused to make Ben Ali's departure a precondition for the negotiations and even proposed "a collaboration with the regime to fight against the "jihadist temptation" that would win over some of Tunisia's youth" (Geisser & Gobe, 2008, op. cit.).

65 Geisser & Gobe (2008), *op. cit.* Ennahdha's renunciation of a strategy of frontal opposition with the government was also favored by the changing political context. Gobe and Geisser explain that Soliman's terrorist attacks in 2007 have, in a way, helped to shift the threat of the "classic" Islamist current to the so-called "jihadist" current. This context was used by the leader of Ennahdha, Rached Ghannouchi, to present his movement as part of a moderate, responsible and constructive opposition, even offering his services in the fight against terrorism (Ibid; McCarthy, Rory (2018), *Inside Tunisia's Al-Nahda: Between Politics and Preaching*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 118 & 173).

attitude towards the authoritarian regime.[66] What Haugbølle and Cavatorta describe as the "failure" of opposition coalition initiatives should thus be seen in this light rather than simply as the result of ideological divergences and personal rivalries.[67] The party's wait-and-see attitude towards the popular uprisings in 2010–11 can also be partly explained by the refusal to run the risk of having to undergo repression again and to jeopardize its perspectives of political integration,[68] rather than simply a disconnection with citizens as argued by Haugbølle and Cavatorta.[69]

Thus, it is only when the Islamist party is legalized in March 2011 that it will take an active and visible part in the process that will lead to the election of the National Constituent Assembly[70] from which it will emerge victorious. Ennahdha coming to power in October 2011as part of a coalition with two parties from the Centre-left (Ettaktol and the cpr), which, however, had a marginal role in the government,[71] and the launching of the constitution-drafting process marks from then on the reemergence of political controversy on religious and identity issues, contributing to the re-ignition of ideological conflicts and confrontations with Islamist-Salafi forces and secular forces that were not members of the Troika.[72]

Ennahdha in Power: Facing the Pluralization of Islamic Actors and Secularist Pressure (2011–2014)

In the wake of the revolution, Ennahdha – as the main Islamic actor in the country historically – faced an intensifying competition for the control of different

66 Ibid.

67 Haugbølle and Cavatorta (2011).

68 This analysis also applies to the Islamist party pjd in Morocco, which chose to stay out of the revolutionary movement (*Mouvement du 20 Février*) because it feared it could lose the benefits of its "legitimist strategy" *vis-à-vis* the monarchy, see Seniguer, Haoues (2012), "Les islamistes à l'épreuve…," *op. cit.*

69 Rikke H. Haugbølle and Francesco Cavatorta, "Will the Real Tunisian Opposition Please Stand Up? Opposition Coordination Failures under Authoritarian Constraints," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 38: 3 (2011): 323–341.

70 Bendana, *op.cit.*

71 Ennahdha indeed controlled 16 ministries (including Interior, Foreign Affairs, Justice, Transitional Justice, Trade, Health, and High Education), and the cpr and Ettakatol 4 and 5 respectively under the government of the nahdhawi Hamadi Jebali.

72 For example, Nejib Chebbi (president of the Parti Démocrate Progressiste) "positioned himself as an anti-Islamist candidate reneging on the experienced of the 18 October alliance" (Haugbolle and Cavatorta 2011: 340). Alia Gana and Gilles Van Hamme, eds., *Élections et territoires en Tunisie. Enseignements des scrutins post-révolution (2011–2014)* (Tunis/Paris: irmc-Karthala, 2016).

fields of action (religious, associative, educative, charity, political, etc.). The emergence of new actors in these fields implied, however, that Ennahdha could not exert a monopoly over religious expression in the socio-political realm anymore and had to deal with this diversity strategically. At the same time, the renewed importance played by secular actors such as the ugtt syndicate and the reconstitution of a modernist-bourguibist force around Nidaa Tounes from 2012 onwards questioned Ennahdha's ability to engage with the diverse Islamic actors without being accused of trying to (re)impose itself as their hegemon. The constitution-drafting process crystallized this twofold pressure.

Ennahdha and the Rise of Salafis

New Islamic actors arising after the revolution included new religious entrepreneurs and self-proclaimed imams ousting 'regime' imams, later coordinated by a revolutionary Salafi-Jihadi movement leaning towards institutionalization (Ansar al-Sharia),[73] various Salafi schools and associations, and political parties (Hizb al-Asala, Hizb al-Rahma, and Jabhat al-Islah). While al-Asala and al-Rahma were empty shells, ji was relatively successful in mobilizing Salafis between 2011 and 2013. ji's appeal hinged on the party's special relationships with Ennahdha, which oscillated between cooperation and competition. On the one hand, Jabhat al-Islah shared a history of militancy in close connection with Ennahdha under the authoritarian regimes. On the other hand, it embodied a more radical Islamic competitor to Ennahdha, which allowed the party to temporarily attract a significant segment of the Tunisian Salafi and Islamist landscape.

ji leaders were the founders of the Islamic Front in Tunisia (*Jabhah Islamiyya*), created in 1986 following the decision of the executive committee of the Islamic Group (*al-jama'a al-islamiyya*) – Ennahdha's predecessor in the 1970s – to convert the religious movement into a political party (the mti, Harakat al-Ittijah al-Islami), a move that the Salafi members of the *jama'a* opposed. Salafi figures Muhammad 'Ali Hurrath, Muhammad Khouja, Fouad Ben Salah, and Rafiq al-Ouni among others thus splinted from the movement to structure a Salafi group which rejected any dialogue with the regime in contrast with the Islamist mit.[74] ji and Ennahdha's respective leadership thus

73 Michaël B. Ayari and Fabio Merone, "Ansar al-charia Tunisie: une institutionnalisation à la croisée des chemins," in Michel Camau and Frédéric Vairel, eds., *Soulèvements et recompositions politiques dans le monde arab*e (Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 2014), 414–428.

74 Interview with ji's president, 12/05/2018; Interview with former Jabhah Islamiyya leader, Carthage, 28/01/2020.

had personal ties since the 1970-80s and subsequently experienced repression and imprisonment or exile together. At the 1989 elections, which Ben Ali had allegedly opened to a virtually pluralist competition, ji officiously supported Ennahdha's participation, whose surprise 17.75 % score nation-wide and up to 30 % in some cities such as Sousse led to a decade of repression upon both Islamists and Salafis.[75]

After the fall of Ben Ali in 2011, the triumphant return of Rached Ghannouchi to Tunisia triggered the swift revival of Ennahdha's clandestine networks, which paved the way for the Islamists' victory at the October elections.[76] Soon after the appointment of the Troika government, where Ennahdha occupied a dominant position, Salafi proto parties were granted the right to join partisan politics. As the prerogative to deliver party visas was transferred to the Prime Minister's office, ji obtained a party license from the Prime Minister Hamadi Jebali, a prominent Ennahdha leader, on March 29, 2012. The timing of this authorization was likely to be strategic as it occurred precisely three days after Ennahdha officially announced relinquishing the sharia clause into the constitutional draft,[77] a decision that stirred controversy inside the Islamist party and alienated many Salafis, who started to question Ennahdha' Islamic credentials. This discontent generated a convergence of Islamist and Salafi activists (Ennahdha members Sahbi Atig and Habib Ellouze as well as ji members, quietist Salafis and the Tunisian Front of Islamic Associations) who gathered in front of the Parliament on March 16, to push for the inscription of sharia into the constitution.[78]

In fact, ji militants had been pushing for the formation of an "Islamic front for the implementation of sharia" with Ennahdha, which they thought could be realized through the long-standing personal contacts they had with key nahdhawi cadres, including Rached Ghannouchi.[79] ji saw this proximity as an opportunity for political learning, as well as an opportunity to influence the constitutional process. Wary of Ennahdha's allegedly compromising attitude vis-à-vis its secular government counterparts, ji was keen on checking Ennahdha's Islamic credentials and pushed for an Islamic aggiornamento of the constitutional identity of Tunisia. ji indeed initially advocated the creation

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75 Wolf (2017); Rached Ghannouchi, "From Political Islam to Muslim Democracy. The Ennahda Party and the Future of Tunisia," *Foreign Policy*, September/October 2016, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/tunisia/political-islam-muslim-democracy.

76 Séverine Labat, *Les islamistes tunisiens* (Paris: Demopolis, 2013); McCarthy (2018a).

77 Wolf (2017), 145.

78 Francesco Cavatorta and Sabrina Zouaghi, "A Doomed Relationship: Ennahdha and Salafism", *Issue Brief*, Baker Institute (2018).

79 Interview with a former ji leader, Tunis, 25/05/2018.

of an Islamic state (*dawla islamiyya*) based on sharia, the authorization of polygamy, and the abolition of the 1956 Personal Status Code (CSP). Like in Egypt, political Salafism developed as a constitutional lobby on the right wing of Islamist parties.[80]

The tensions and mobilizations of the two respective camps have mainly crystallized around constitutional issues related to the sources of the law, gender equality, and fundamental rights. In February 2012, elected members of the Islamist party's hard wing launched a campaign to demand that sharia law be the fundamental source of legislation. This campaign was met with counterdemonstrations organized by secularist associations at the occasion of the fifty-sixth anniversary of independence (20th March). Mid-March 2012, Ennahdha finally announced it would not include sharia law in the Constitution.[81] The final constitution would eventually consecrate the principle of "the teachings of Islam" (*ta'lim al-islam*). Other clashes between Ennahdha and secularist forces emerged on draft articles respectively proposing gender "complementarity" rather than equality (article 28 of the August 2012 draft proposed by Ennahdha) and criminalizing "all attacks against the sacred" (article 3 of the draft submitted by Ennahdha). The draft article on gender "complementarity"[82] in particular was met with strong opposition by secular civil society organizations that mobilized on Women's Day (13 August, 2012),[83] and was eventually rejected by the Assembly on the basis that it contradicted the principles of equality set out in Article 21.[84] Another

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80 Clément Steuer, "Les salafistes dans le champ politique égyptien," *Politique Étrangère* 4 (2013): 133–143; Stéphane, Lacroix, "Sheikhs and Politicians: Inside the New Egyptian Salafism," *Brookings Institute*, Policy Briefing June (2012): 1–12; Théo Blanc, *La politisation du salafisme après les révolutions arabes. Le cas tunisien*, Mémoire de recherche de Master 2 de l'IEPG, Université de Grenoble Alpes (2018).

81 Larbi Chouikha and Eric Gobe, *Histoire de la Tunisie depuis l'indépendance* (Paris: La Découverte, 2015).

82 The controversial "complementarity" clause stated that "the state shall guarantee the protection of the rights of women and shall support the gains thereof as true partners to men in the building of the nation and as *having a role complementary thereto within the family*."

83 Amel Ben Rhouma, Bilel Kchouk, "L'accès des femmes aux postes de gouvernance en Tunisie. Une analyse en termes de capabilities," *Travail, genre et sociétés*, 2019, n° 41, 105-125 ; Nanako Tamaru, Olivia Holt-Ivry, and Marie O'Reilly, « Beyond Revolution. How Women Influenced Constitution Making in Tunisia », Report, March 2018, https://www.inclusivesecurity.org/publication/beyond-revolution-women-influenced-constitution-making-tunisia/.

84 Article 21 of the 2014 Tunisian constitution provides: "Male and female citizens are equal in rights and duties. They are equal before the law without discrimination," Constitution de la RépubliqueTunisienne 2015, https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/lib-docs/HRBodies/UPR/Documents/Session27/TN/6Annexe4Constitution_fr.pdf.

source of tension was the absence of references to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and freedom of conscience in the second version of the draft Constitution (December 2012).

On April 24, 2013, anc President Mustapha Ben Jaâfar presented a constitutional draft to the media, which he described as "the best constitution in the world."[85] However, the text contained no article on "freedom of thought" and "freedom of conscience" and made no reference to international texts such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.[86] Other articles attenuated or contradicted the "civil" character of the state, such as that stipulating that no amendment to the Constitution could call into question Islam as the religion of the state (art. 141).[87] This prompted the mobilization of constitutional lawyers, most of whom are linked to the secularist pole of Tunisian society.[88] Although a new draft was signed on June 1, 2013, by the anc President Ben Jaâfar and by members of the drafting and coordination committee including the nahdhawi Habib Kheder, the assassination of elected representative Mohamed Brahmi on July 25, 2013 and attacks against the army in the region of Kasserine triggered a major political crisis that put Ennahdha under significant pressure to compromise on the draft. Freedom of conscience would eventually be introduced in the final version of the constitution (art. 6) and the civil nature of the state clarified (art. 2).

Although ji's pro-sharia agenda had thus seemingly little effect on Ennahdha's decision-making, ji's traction on the Islamist party originated from its capacity to channel various Salafi currents into democratic politics. At ji's inaugural conference on July 8, 2012, its President Muhammad Khouja had indeed announced the party's intention to bring Tunisian Salafis (either quietist or Jihadi) into politics.[89] In the following years, the party managed to convince a significant cohort of Salafi-Jihadis to support the party's activities through intensive fieldworks campaigns and regular theological and ideological discussions with Ansar al-Sharia's Jihadis.[90] The Head of Youth, in

85 In this text, the state is qualified as "civil", powers are separated, the independence of the media is guaranteed, "equality between men and women" and "human rights" are recognized.

86 Bendana (2012).

87 Zied Krichen, "The Ennahdha Movement confronted to the constitutional drafting process: From Shariah to freedom of conscience," undp (2016).

88 Chouikha and Gobe (2015).

89 Thierry Brésillon, "Tunisie: un parti "salafiste" pour quoi faire ?", *l'obs*, 10/07/2012, https://www.nouvelobs.com/rue89/rue89-tunisie-libre/20120710.RUE1156/tunisie-un-parti-salafiste-pour-quoi-faire.html.

90 Interview with former party president, Tunis, 17/04/2018.

particular, a former Salafi-Jihadi who had fought in Iraq in 2003, was at the forefront of these ideological dialogues aiming at presenting partisan politics as 'Islamically' legit[91] – a stance that most Salafis traditionally reject.[92] Although Ennahdha endeavoured to dialogue with Salafis on its own,[93] it soon realized that after having brokered several compromises with secular parties, its perceived declining Islamic credentials would not be sufficient to rally Salafis to politics, while Salafi parties had not been 'corrupted' by the experience of power yet and were still able to attract more revolutionary Salafis disgruntled by Ennahdha's constitutional compromises. In parallel, the party came under increased criticism from secularist forces for its alleged collusion with Salafis. As a result, Ennahdha delegated the task of bringing Salafis into politics to ji. It also hoped that ji would bring Salafis towards a less confrontational attitude towards Ennahdha. After all, ji had announced at its inaugural conference that the "party will be a support for Ennahdha."[94] Therefore, Ennahdha's outsourcing of the politicization strategy to ji stemmed primarily from the concern to immunize its relationship with secular parties, whose suspicions had to be kept at bay in order to secure the transition process.

As the conflicting process of the constitution drafting illustrates, the final version of the constitution adopted in January 2014 and hailed by analysts as testifying to the moderation and art of compromise of the Islamist party, is above all the result of power relations between Islamist and secularist parliamentarians and of the mobilization of civil society actors.[95] As Bendana put it, "the succession of crises and direct interventions by civil society have played a major role in the process of writing a text that many constituents do not agree with."[96] The tensions that marked the drafting of the constitution and its successive revisions also explain why the final version contains ambiguous and contradictory provisions for interpretive room for two opposing conceptions

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91 Interview with the ex-party leader in charge of the Youth Bureau, Ben Arous, 14/05/2018.

92 Quintan Wiktorowicz, "Anatomy of the Salafi Movement," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 29 (2006): 207–40; Bernard Rougier ed., *Qu'est-ce que le salafisme?* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2008); Roel Meijer ed., *Global Salafism. Islam's New Religious Movement* (London: Hurst & Co. Publishers, 2009); Francesco Cavatorta and Fabio Merone eds., *Salafism after the Arab Awakening. Contending with People's Power* (Hurst & Co, 2016).

93 Arielle Thédrel, "Ennahda "a engagé des discussions avec les salafistes," *Le Figaro*, 02/02/2012, http://www.lefigaro.fr/international/2012/04/02/01003-20120402ARTFIG00624-ennahda-a-engage-des-discussions-avec-les-salafistes.php.

94 Brésillon (2012).

95 Mekki Nidha, « Tunisia Equality in Gender and Constitution », Arab Forum for Citizenship in Transition, report, September 2014 https://www.ipinst.org/images/pdfs/FACTReport-Gender_Constitution-English-September2014.pdf.

96 Bendana (2012).

of the state, one secularist and the other Islamic conservative.[97] Throughout the constitution-drafting process, Ennahdha endeavored to maintain channels of communication open with both secularists and Salafis, which it believed was the only way to secure the democratic transition and its political integration and respectability.[98] The 2013–2014 political crisis would, however, make this precarious equilibrium unsustainable.

Ennahdha and the Rise of Faith-Based Associations

In parallel with its delicate relations with new Salafi actors emerging in the religious and political spheres, Ennahdha handled new relations with faith-based associations, which massively emerged after 2011. Thanks to the new decree-law 88/2011, which largely simplified the procedures for the creation of associations, several activists who were previously engaged in the Movement of the Islamic Tendency (*harakat al-ittijah al- islami*), the precursor of the Ennahdha party, decided to join the civil society sphere, while others preferred to keep their partisan engagement with Ennahda. However, at the very beginning, the boundary between social and political activism was blurred, as several party leaders maintained an informal multipositionality between the political party and religious associations involved in charitable and preaching activities.[99]

The strong presence of Ennahdha in the associative world, and in particular in social welfare activities, became an issue for the party that was accused of indirectly re-creating a system of hegemony by linking the machine of social aid to that of political control, such as the rcd during Ben Ali's regime.[100] However, activists interviewed justified this social cohesion as a way to destroy former clientelist networks inherited from the authoritarian regime. Findings show in some cases the activists' attempt to create closer ties among Islamic associations in order to create a cohesive social bloc against the "attacks of secular forces."[101] In Sfax, several preaching and charitable associations built a network called *Attaawoun* (from the verse of the Qur'an, meaning "collaboration")

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97 Chouikha and Gobe (2015).

98 Ennahdha also believed that participation in formal politics would be the greatest barrier against radicalization as violence would prove useless or counterproductive if political grievances were allowed to be voiced (Marks 2017).

99 Sigillò (2020b), *op. cit.*

100 Ibid.

101 "Tunisia's Evolving Islamic Charitable Sector and its Model of Social Mobilization," *Middle East Institute*, https://www.mei.edu/publications/tunisias-evolving-islamic-charitable-sector-and-its-model-social-mobilization.

as a way to join forces in a perceived constraining environment.[102] In Tunis, several activists close to the Ennahdha party, together with Salafi actors and other pious groups not necessarily interested in politics, created the 'Tunisian Front of Islamic Associations' (*al-jabhah al-tunisiyya li-l-jami'iat al-islamiyya*), whose goal was "to bring together the Tunisian Islamic forces to fight against secularism in Tunisia, the desecration of Islam and the insertion of sharia in the constitution."[103] The Tunisian front was particularly active throughout 2012, and it was the main organizer of demonstrations and protests in front of the Constituent Assembly in support of the Islamist party against secular forces.

As highlighted by other scholars, some figures, like Habib Ellouze and Sadok Shourou, historical Ennahdha leaders, distinguished themselves as those able to make a bridge between the party and this heterogeneous Islamic public.[104] In 2012, the Front organized several demonstrations "in defense of Islamic principles" in society and politics, which often took violent forms.[105] For instance, in September 2012, the Front supported the attack on the American embassy in Tunis to express discontent about a movie shown in America that allegedly "insulted the Prophet." Finally, the Front participated in the petition to oppose the general strike that the ugtt had planned to organize on December 13, 2012, in response to the attack on its headquarters which the trade union attributed to Islamist activists close to Ennahda. Islamic charities, da'wa associations, and the imams' associations linked to Ennahdha and other Salafi parties, such as Jabhat al-Islah, were the organizations signing the petition in support of Ennahdha.[106]

The Islamist reference of some religious associations led to a strong reaction of the country's secularist opposition forces, driven by the fear of an alleged Ennahda's secret project to Islamize the country. After the assassination of the leftist activist Mohamed Brahmi in July 2013, opposition groups such as the Popular Front, Nidaa Tounes, and other civil society activists demanded the dissolution of the Ennahda-led government. In light of this momentum, Mohamed Bennour, a former member of the Ettakatol party, launched the Tunisian version of the Egyptian protest movement Tamarrod (meaning 'rebellion'), which during the same period had led to the dismissal of President

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102 Ester Sigillò(2018). *Mobilizing for or through development? Trajectories of civic activism in post-authoritarian Tunisia*, PhD Dissertation, Scuola Normale Superiore, Florence.

103 Interview with a member of the Islamic Front of Islamic Associations, Tunis, 7 July 2018.

104 Merone et al., *op. cit.*

105 Mustapha Haddad, *Chronique de la violence politique sous la « Troïka »; de janvier 2012 à décembre 2014* (Editions Arabesques, Tunis, 2018).

106 Ibid.

Mohamed Morsi. Like its Egyptian namesake, the Tunisian group accused Tunisian Islamists of ushering in a religious state and failing to address the economic crisis. The Movement's online petition obtained thousands of signatures opposing the Ennahda-led government. Ennahdha activists, on their side, supported by those involved in faith-based associations, also mobilized to defend the legitimacy of transitional institutions from the "ballot boxes," denouncing in their slogans the threats of the "murderous communists" and the supporters of the military coup.[107] Both sides then engaged in a campaign to win the support of civil society and denounce the illegitimacy of the opponent's claims.

Excluding 'Radicals' to Secure Political Integration

The pressure on Ennahdha reached its highest point during the large demonstration in front of the parliament in the summer of 2013, demanding the resignation of the government, following several violent episodes in the country (attack on the US embassy in September 2012, assassinations of Chokri Belaid and Mohamed Brahmi in February and July 2013, for which Ennahdha was blamed) and the overthrow of the Muslim Brother Muhammad Morsi in Egypt. While Ennahdha refused to leave power, it decided to outlaw Ansar al-Sharia in August 2013 for its involvement in the attacks, made compromises on the constitutional draft, and had to accept the setting up of a technocratic caretaker government in January 2014.

The ban of Ansar al-Sharia, at the opposite end of Ennahdha's benevolent attitude towards the group until then, drove most Salafi-Jihadis into domestic terrorist groups (such as aqmi and the isis affiliate Oqba ibn Nafaa) or foreign Jihadi movements in Libya and Syria.[108] ji's support base, which mainly depended on its ability to politicize Jihadi-leaning Salafis, was thus dislocated, marking a break with the party's previous strategy or efforts to entrench 'legitimate' Salafi politics in Tunisia. The Salafi party also harshly criticized Ennahdha's choice not to field a candidate at the presidential elections when ji decidedly chose to support Moncef Marzouqi against the "enemy" Beji Qaid Essebsi.[109] ji's hopes to constitute an Islamic Front with

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107 Éric Gobe, and Larbi Chouikha, "La Tunisie politique en 2013: de la bipolarisation idéologique au «consensus constitutionnel»?" *L'Année du Maghreb* 11 (2014), 301–322.

108 Merone, Fabio, "Between social contention and takfirism: the evolution of the Salafi-jihadi movement in Tunisia," *Mediterranean Politics* (2016), doi: 10.1080/13629395.2016.1230949; Zelin, Y. Aaron, *Your Sons Are at Your Service. Tunisia's Missionaries of Jihad* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020).

109 Interview with ji's former president, Tunis, 17/04/2018.

Ennahdha were eventually disappointed when Ennahdha decided to ally with the secular party Nidaa Tounes,[110] turning its back on the politicized Salafis. They held to the hope of seeing one day a full-fledged Islamic government in Tunisia. ji's former and current leadership condemned this alliance, which is deemed contrary to the revolution ("*ma khidmesh al-thawra*"), mainly because it entailed Ennahdha's acceptance of the return of the former regime's senior figures.[111]

While Ennahdha had initially supported ji in its efforts to channel Salafis into formal politics, after the 2013 crisis, the party turned its back on the Salafis, which were now seen as an obstacle to the party's acceptation by secular party Nidaa Tounes – a *sine qua non* condition for securing its place in power. Ennahdha's 'collusion' with Salafis was one of Nidaa's main rallying cry, as the party had based its election campaign both on the theme of restoring the authority of the state and on a discourse hostile to political Islam.[112] Maintaining direct channels with the Salafis would thus run the risk of Ennahdha losing its grip on the state, which the Islamists still hold in great fear since the repression decade. As Torelli put it, "al-Nahda has almost been compelled to publicly distance itself from more radical forms of Salafism to complete its transition from an opposition movement to one that is integrated into the institutional system."[113] In other words, the 'normalization' of Ennahdha could only be achieved through the exclusion of Salafis, both political and Jihadi.[114] This exclusion relied on a strategy of blaming and othering the Salafis for their radical tendencies, which "helped Ennahda to construct itself not only as a moderate, democratic actor [...] but also as an effective and reliable political force" in the eyes of its secular counterparts.[115] Besides Salafis, the political crisis also pushed Ennahdha to reconfigure the modalities of its relationships with faith-based associations, which came under acute state scrutiny and control from 2014 onwards.

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110 Interview with a former ji leader, Tunis, 25/05/2018.

111 Interview with the president of ji Rachid al-Torkhani, Tunis, 12/05/2018.

112 Alia Gana and GillesVan Hamme (2016), *Processus électoraux et territoires en Tunisie*, Karthala, Paris.

113 M. Stefano, Torelli, "The Multi-Faceted Dimensions of Tunisian Salafism," in Cavatorta and Merone eds, *Salafism After the Arab Awakening*, 64.

114 Blanc, "Ennahdha et les salafistes", op. cit.

115 Krichen (2016), op.cit.

Reconfiguring the Relationships Between the Political and the Religious Fields After the Crisis

In the wake of 2013 political crisis, Ennahdha found itself in an even more constrained space to secure its political inclusion through its relations with secular forces. Following a securitization campaign of the religious field, and in the context of a coalition government with the secularist party Nidaa Tounes, Ennahdha adopted a 'specialization' policy that aimed at reconfiguring the nexus between politics (the party) and religion (the movement). This, however, did not prevent dynamics of convergence between Islamist and Salafi militants in various mobilizations such as the anti-colibe movement and the electoral coalition al-Karama.

From Securitization to Specialization (2014–2018)

In January 2014, the technocratic government led by Mehdi Jomaa was set up following the national dialogue undertaken in the aftermath of the institutional and political crisis. The government started a campaign to restore state control over mosques[116] and several religious associations.[117] Several Islamic associations became the target of police operations, which intended to verify the legality of their activities. The primary mechanism of pressure and control was over procedures of accounting. Through this device, many associations were sanctioned with the accusation of hiding illicit funding linked to terrorist activities.[118]

Against this scenario, and as a consequence of secular forces' pressures, Ennahdha accelerated its process of 'specialization' (*takhasus*) of the political and the religious spheres, which started in 2012 and culminated with the

116 Several imams known for their radical discourse, including some accused of having links with jihadist currents were dismissed. Despite the protestations voiced by some Ennahdha leaders against these dismissals, the Islamist party finally accepted them. This ambivalent stance can be explained by the dilemma that the party had to face: on the one hand, the concern of not alienating its support base by denouncing the dismissals, and on the other hand, the concern to maintain the spirit of compromise and dialogue with the new government. Ennahda was also not necessarily discontent that some of the dismissed imams were members of the union of imams affiliated with the Tunisian Labor Organisation (ott), whose declared ambition had been to offer an alternative and competing Islamist project to that of Ennhada. See Anna Grasso, "L'intégration des islamistes tunisiens *via* les syndicats ,» *Année du Maghreb*, 22/2020, in Dossier: Les partis islamistes ont-ils vraiment changé ?, 185–201; Marie Verdier, "La Tunisie essaie de reprendre le contrôle de ses mosquées," *La Croix*, 13/06/2014.

117 Interview with an official of the Presidency of the Republic, Tunis, 10/07/2018.

118 Sigillò 2020a, *op. cit.*

10th party's congress in May 2016.[119] As T. Bresillon points out, this process of specialization is part of the strategy of alliance with the Nidaa Tounas party, winner of the 2014 legislative elections, and thanks to which Ennahda was able to "consolidate its position in the political landscape and in the state apparatus." The author recalls in this regard that Béji Caïd Essebsi, leader of the party Nidaa Tounes "came in person to the 10th Congress of the party to salute the role of Ennahdha in the stabilization of the state."[120]

The first institutional consequence of the specialization process was the separation of careers between the party leaders on the one hand and the leaders of the associations on the other.[121] Several party militants left the boards of Islamic associations once elected in the *majlis al-shura* (general counsel of the party), and members of the *shura*, in turn, left the party to focus on the activities of their associations and decided to be engaged exclusively in the civic sphere.[122] While the party tended toward typical neo-liberal politics, charitable associations developed into a technocratic specialization going in the direction of professionalized ngo s, thus responding to the logic of civic engagement separated from the political sphere.[123] This transformation could be seen as a paradigm of specialization of the Islamic commitment to civic affairs. Indeed, according to the interviews, associative members claimed themselves as 'specialist of civic affairs,' whereas Ennahda is an actor "expert in political affairs."[124] Therefore, professionalization and specialization in 'civic affairs' became a necessity for the existence of associations with religious orientation.[125]

However, this transformation did not weaken the Islamist movement, rather it allowed its reconfiguration.[126] As also stated by associative members, the 'specialization' does not hamper the reference to Islamic values: "this transformation actually represents an evolution, which would aim the elaboration of a modern Islam."[127] According to a party leader, the 'specialization' should be associated with the specialization of the associative field.[128] New

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119 Blanc 2020.

120 Thierry Brésillon, (2021), « Ennahda ou le prix de la reconnaissance », Arab Reform Initiative, 26 November 2021, https://www.arab-reform.net/pdf/?pid=20721&plang=fr.

121 Sigillò 2021a, *op. Cit.*

122 Ibid.

123 Interviews with several presidents of charitable associations in Tunis, Sfax, Siliana and Medenine in 2016.

124 Sigillò (2021a) *op. cit.*

125 Ibid.

126 Ibid.

127 Interview with the president of the association DwI, Tunis, 5/07/2018.

128 Interview with Habib Ellouze, Hammamet, 22/05/2016.

professionalized networks of associations emerged in the same urban areas, creating a sort of mutual aid Islamic-oriented service area where different types of organizations are locally connected.[129] For instance, in Sfax and Tunis, the new commercial part of the cities has been almost entirely covered by a vast network of Islamic social organizations, such as da'wa associations, the Imams' association, the association of Islamic economics, the Zakat association, charities, and other religious associations. Each association has its specialization and is complementary to the other. For example, the zakat association is a pivotal actor in the resource mobilization of the Islamic ecosystem. It can address the so-called businessman wishing to pay zakat to charitable associations or, on the contrary, provide sound contacts to charitable associations for fund-raising.[130]

In other terms, the specialization does not go in the direction of a separation between the Islamist party and civil society. Yet, it contributes to the re-configuration of the relationship between Ennahdha and the heterogeneous Islamic public.[131] Thanks to the specialization of different actors, the Islamic network is diversified, so the risk of the movement being weakened by 'secular forces' is lower. Moreover, the specialization does not hamper the coordination of the network. This strategy is evident in the persistence of comprehensive mobilizations for the defense of sharia in various fields, as attested by the campaign organized against the report issued by the Tunisian Commission for Individual Freedoms and Equality Committee (colibe).

Published on June 8, 2018, the colibe report, proposed by President of the Republic Beji Qaid Essebsi in mid-2018, sparked controversy between those who approved its content and those who attacked it. Gender equality in the inheritance law was the report's main contentious point for the Ennahdha party, which released an official communiqué stating that the colibe report "threatened the family structure and the unity of society." Rached Ghannouchi wrote a personal letter to President Essebsi on August the 13th, expressing his reservations on the equal inheritance proposal. The controversy triggered by this proposal highlighted a fundamental disagreement between secularists and Islamists over the interpretation of the Constitution, which both camps invoke to support their position. While the President of the Republic mobilized arguments related to the need for laws to conform with the constitution to justify his support for the colibe report's proposals, the Islamist party invoked article 1 (Islamic identity of Tunisia) and article 7 ("The family is the

129 Sigillò 2020b, *op. cit.*
130 Sigillò 2020b, *op. cit.*
131 Ibid.

base cell of society, it is the state's responsibility to protect it"). Nourredine Bhiri, leader of Ennahdha's parliamentary block, declared that the report was "refuted from the angle of the Constitution, Islam, and values and morals."[132] Other Islamist figures such as former Ennahdha member Hamadi Jebali also rejected the inheritance equality proposal while calling to protect the constitution.[133] These diverging interpretations stemmed directly from the "semantic uncertainty" of the Constitution, allowing actors to confer "antagonistic significations" to its provisions and spirit.[134] This situation increased the stakes around the (yet-to-come) creation of the Constitutional court, which had the potential to settle the conflict over interpretations.[135]

On August 11, 2018, various associations supported by Islamist activists launched a campaign against the colibe. This campaign culminated in the organization of a sit-in in front of the Parliament, at the initiative of the non-governmental National Coordination for the Defense of the Qur'an, the Constitution, and Equitable Development, together with the association Dawa wa Islah.[136] The protesters, with a banner reading "Quran text before any other text," accused the committee of acting contrary to the teachings of Islam. This mobilization echoed all those protests undertaken by the Islamic front in 2012–2013. Still, the main difference: the initiative was formally labeled as a 'civil society' mobilization for the support of Islamic values, thus respecting the rule of the 'specialization' and de-responsibilizing Ennahdha from the accusation to pursuit of objectives linked to political Islam.[137] However, notwithstanding this formal division of activities, the persistence of an informal multi-positionality of party members in the associative field allows coordination between the two spheres. In addition, the anti-colibe mobilization was coordinated not only by militants close to Ennahdha but also with the help of other actors, such as Salafi activists engaged in the associative field, joining the mobilizations against the colibe as part of the same Islamic constellation wishing "to

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132 Latifa Lakhdhar, "L'égalité dans l'héritage, Ennahdha entre le dit et le non-dit [Inheritance equality, Ennahdha between the said and the unsaid]," *Leaders*, 04/12/2018, http://www.leaders.com.tn/article/26045-latifa-lakhdhar-l-egalite-dans-l-heritage-ennahdha-entre-le dit-et-le-non-dit?nuid=0&did=0.

133 See the statement here: https://www.facebook.com/M.Hamadi.Jebali/posts/2053577808027836.

134 Jean-Philippe Bras, "Un État "civil" peut-il être religieux ? Débats tunisiens," *Pouvoirs* 156 (2016): 55–70.

135 Nadia Marzouki, "La transition tunisienne: du compromis démocratique à la réconciliation forcée," *Pouvoirs* 156 (2016): 83–94.

136 Interview with a member of a Salafi association, Tunis, Ettadhamen,10/07/2018.

137 Gana and Sigillò (2019), *op. cit.*

fight against the secularization of the country."[138] Da'wa-oriented Ennahda activists engaged in the associative field within the specialization framework are progressively detaching themselves from the party's logic by claiming to be the true benchmark of Islamic activism, thus rebuilding relationships with Salafi activists engaged in the social fabric as well.[139]

In fact, they come out strengthened by their successful protest campaign against the colibe, in the face of an insufficiently organized mobilization on the side of the supporters of the report. Interviews with representatives of women's rights organizations reveal the difficulties the latter encountered in implementing coordinated and efficient action in support of the draft law on equal inheritance. Given the sensitivity of the issue at stake, the divisions it caused even within the "secular" camp, and the government's lack of commitment to promoting the draft law it had approved, the pressure exerted by the feminist associations proved insufficient for the parliament to adopt the bill.[140]

In any case, the colibe conflict, which has been brought to the front as a dividing line between the parties in the 2019 elections campaigns,[141] highlights the complex dynamics and interactions in which the Islamist party's pluralization process is embedded.

New Actors in the Reconfigured Sociopolitical Field (2019–2021)

The reconfiguration of the religious and political fields appeared clearly in the 2019 elections, which gave rise to new socio-political mobilizations where Islamist and Salafi militants converged. One of these mobilizations is the Coalition for Dignity (Itilaf al-Karama) which gathered a heterogeneous membership bringing together former Ennahda party members who had left the party after its pragmatic turn, members of the Salafi party Jabhat al-Islah, some independent Salafi sheiks, ex-members of the lpr (Leagues for the Protection of the Revolution) both from Islamic or leftist backgrounds, as well as lawyers, independent journalists, and bloggers.[142] This new coalition, which obtained

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138 Ibid.

139 Ibid.

140 Interviews with representatives of feminist associations (Association Tunisienne des Femmes Démocrates, atfd; Mouatinet, Association Majida Bouliba pour la Modernité (May-June 2019) and members of the colibe commission (May- June 2019).

141 Salih Yasun, "Attitudes on Family Law as an Electoral Cleavage: Survey Evidence from Tunisia. *Middle East Law and Governance* 12: 2 (2020): 131–166.

142 Théo Blanc and Ester Sigillò, "Beyond the 'Islamists vs. Secularists': The Rise of New Challengers After The 2019 Tunisian Elections," *Policy Brief* 27 (2019), Middle East Directions (med), doi: 10.2870/142604.

a surprising 21 seats in parliament, built its success on a program emphasizing Ennahda's inability to implement the widespread claims of the revolution due to its 'politics of compromise' with the ancient regime's political forces.

Although most conservative members of al-Karama blamed Ennahda for imitating secularist parties, the party did not present itself as a religious, political group. During the electoral campaign, the Coalition portrayed itself as a political force of rupture, strongly criticizing the compromise between the Islamist party and the secular powers, considered as "an elitist agreement established at the expense of the revolutionary principles.[143] As a matter of fact, some party activists decided to join the Coalition as a way to reject the "arbitrary decisions" taken by the party leadership.[144] A sovereigntist agenda was also put forward calling on Western powers "to stop meddling in domestic politics" and "bringing dignity back to Tunisian people."[145] While defining itself as a conservative force seeking to restore traditional values and institutions, the Coalition proclaimed that its primary mission is to fulfill the unaccomplished goals of the revolution, first and foremost socio-economic justice, not to pursue an Islamist agenda seeking the implementation of sharia law. Al-Karama thus appears as a form of hybridization between Salafism and populism,[146] advocating revolutionary rupture with the conservative consensus that had prevailed until then between Ennahdha and Nidaa Tounes. Notably, the Coalition's initial rejection of the party structure convinced Salafi sheiks that they could pursue a moral order in the political field without giving primacy to partisan and political interests over religion.[147]

However, despite its critical discourse against the political establishment and its claim to be a political force of rupture, Itilaf Al-Karama eventually entered a coalition not only with Ennahdha but also with Qalb Tounes, a secular party led by press tycoon Nabil Karoui, to form a parliamentary majority

143 Blanc and Sigillò, "Beyond…".

144 Sigillò 2021a.

145 Blanc and Sigillò (2019).

146 Jasmin Lorch and Hatem Chakroun, "Salafism Meets Populism: The Al-Karama Coalition and the Malleability of Political Salafism in Tunisia," *mei*, 12/05/2020, https://www.mei.edu/publications/salafism-meets-populism-al-karama-coalition-and-malleability-political-salafism.

147 Ester Sigillò, "Salafis' Hybrid Trajectories of SocioPolitical Engagement in Post-2013 Tunisia. Elements for a Comparative Analysis with Algeria," in Théo Blanc and Olivier Roy, eds, *Salafism: Challenged by Radicalization? Violence, Politics, and the Advent of Post-Salafism*, Middle East directions, European University Institute (2021b), https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/72725/QM-05-21-270-EN-N.pdf ?sequence=1&isAllowed=y; Théo Blanc, "Opportunity, Ideology and Salafi Pathways of Political Activism in Tunisia," *Third World Thematics* (2021), doi: 10.1080/23802014.2021.1965014.

in support to the government. The coalition had been proposed by Ennahdha, which was keen on acting as the pivotal actor between the 'secularists' and the 'radicals' of Itilaf al-Karama to secure political stability. The alliance was, however, controversial, and some of the elected al-Karama, such as the Sfaxian activist imam Ridha al-Jawadi decided to leave the Coalition as it became too embedded within party politicking.[148]

The convergence of interest between Al-Karama and Ennahdha have been manifested through shared positions in parliament and joint actions outside of it. This was notably the case during the sit-in organized by the Free Destourian Party (pdl) to demand the banning and closure of the Tunisian branch of the International Union of Muslim Ulemas when, on March 10, 2021, influential figures of Ennahdha joined the demonstrators of Al Karama to force the pdl militants to lift their sit-in. In addition, as reported by Lorch and Chakroun, some Ennahdha top-level preachers viewed Al-Karama favorably and felt close to the Salafist forces within it.[149] As a result, neither the 2013 crisis nor the party's 'specialization' put an end to converging mobilizations between Islamist and Salafi militants.

Conclusion

Most works devoted to the Tunisian Islamist movement rely on either the inclusion-moderation theory or the post-Islamist theory, according to which its transformation into a moderate, democratic force results from its institutional integration. In contrast, this article demonstrated the need to go beyond the structural-institutional paradigm to encompass the relational dynamics at play behind Ennahdha's political integration. Highlighting the challenges for Ennahdha to assert itself both as a legitimate democratic force and as a credible Islamic movement, we proposed the framing of a strategic pluralization of the Islamic socio-political landscape, by which we mean a reconfiguration of Ennahdha's relations with Salafi and Islamist actors under the pressure of secular forces. This reconfiguration was guided by Ennahdha's utmost concern to secure its political integration throughout several political stages and crises.

Adopting an interactionist lens and a historical perspective, we first showed that Ennahdha's relations with the authoritarian regime and other opposition forces were shaped by the movement's ultimate goal of obtaining

148 Sigillò 2021b.

149 Lorch and Chakroun, "Othering…", 219.

official recognition and integrating itself into the institutional political game. We then dissected the tensions arising from the imperative for Ennahdha to make compromises and alliances with secular forces while not alienating the Islamist-Salafi camp in the post-2011 era, especially in the context of the constitution-drafting process. The rise of Salafi activism after the revolution implied a diversification of the religious field, which challenged Ennahdha's hegemonic position. Ennahdha's efforts to channel Salafis in legal partisan activities intervened as a strategic management of this diversification. Later on, Ennahdha's turn towards the repression of Salafis did not entail a complete rupture between Salafi and Islamist grassroots militants. Ennahda's strategy of specialization – which does not amount to a separation but is the culmination of Ennahdha's redefinition of the nexus between religion and politics – indeed allowed it to reconfigure its relationships with a wider Islamic public which, besides Ennahda's constituency, reincluded Salafi activists engaged in the associative field. Mobilizations against the colibe are an emblematic example of a reconfiguration of Islamist and Salafi networks at the grassroots level. The specialization policy thus appears as a strategic attempt to manage and institutionalize the pluralization of the variegated Islamic socio-political landscape through a logic of complementarity. By highlighting the party's interactions with various social and political actors and the multiple entanglements between partisan militancy and Islamist associative commitments, we show that the control of the religious field remains a major political stake and an arena of competition between actors, thus contributing to the maintenance of boundary porosity between the political and religious spheres.[150]

This strategic management of the Islamic field does not, however, entail a smooth and fully controlled change as the sectorization of the various activities can result in the *autonomization* of the different actors that can eventually disenfranchise from the party. Indeed, the delegation of activities to non-party organizations is thus also accompanied by a phenomenon of competition, as not all Islamic associations and groups function as undercover tools of the party and rather enjoy some degree of autonomy while some even position themselves against Ennahdha. The pluralization process is in this understanding not fully in the hands of Ennahdha. While the party used to enjoy a position of hegemony over the Islamic political landscape before the revolution, it now faces a diversifying Islamist public (both inside and outside the party)

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150 Gana and Sigillò (2019); Alia Gana and Myriam Aït-Aoudia, eds., "Les partis islamistes ont-ils vraiment changé?" (Special Issue), *L'Année du Maghreb* 22 (2020); Loretta Dell'Aguzzo and Ester Sigillò, "Political legitimacy and variations in state-religion relations in Tunisia," *The Journal of North African Studies* 22: 4 (2017): 511–535.

mobilizing through various channels and that challenge its primacy, Itilaf al-Karama being one example.

President Kais Saied's constitutional coup in July 2021 demonstrated that Ennahdha's 'strategic pluralization' in order to stay in power had reached its limits. Indeed, because it has not been accompanied by concrete actions to meet the aspirations of social justice and equality that guided the revolution, the party has not been able to counter the massive rejection expressed by broad segments of the Tunisian population against the political elite at large. As a result, Ennahdha fell victim to its own political integration strategy, driven primarily by the quest to stay in power, which effectively entailed making ill-fated alliances at the risk of alienating its social and electoral constituencies. As Kais Saied's constitutional coup of July 25, 2021, marks the end of this political cycle, Ennahdha finds itself relegated to the opposition for the first time since the revolution.