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# **Understanding the transformation of Political Islam beyond party politics: the case of Tunisia**

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## **Abstract**

This article accounts for the hybrid transformations of the Tunisian Islamist movement. While most of the literature affirms the end of Political Islam in Tunisia through evidence of the Ennahda's compromise with secular forces and the decision to keep politics separate from religion, this contribution offers a new perspective by shifting the unit of analysis from the political party to activists engaged in civil society. Findings show that, due to new opportunities and constraints that characterize the transition process, Islamist activists engaged in the associations have embarked on various trajectories that transform their relationship with the political party, and more generally with politics. This article examines three relational logics involving Islamist activists engaged in the associational field and the political party: professional empowerment, party complementarity, and political challenge. The three logics trace a hybrid dynamic of reconfiguration of the Tunisian Islamist movement that challenges binary interpretations of transformation based on the dichotomy of radicalisation/moderation or on teleological narratives that foretell the end of political Islam in Tunisia.

**Keywords:** Islamism, professionalisation, neoliberalism, social movement theory, Tunisia

## Introduction

The literature on the transformation of Political Islam (or Islamism) has grown considerably in recent years. However, little work focused on the trajectories of Islamist activists committing to other forms of socio-political engagement beyond the party – such as the associational sphere - and, most importantly, on the broader implications that the different modes of engagement have on the transformation of the Islamist ideology.<sup>i</sup> Drawing on the Tunisian case, this article applies a social movement theory's relational approach (Jasper, 2004; Fligstein and McAdam, 2012; Jasper and Duyvendak, 2015) to disentangle the hybrid trajectories of the Tunisian Islamist movement in religious-based associations a time of profound political change, a bumpy transition process characterized by a high political contention between Islamist and secular forces.

Unlike other countries in the MENA region, research on Tunisian Islamic civil society is underdeveloped. This can be explained by the specificity of the country's sociopolitical context. In Egypt, for example, the Muslim Brotherhood had the right, unlike the Ennahda activists in Tunisia, to create charitable associations tolerated by the national authorities. In the 1970s and 1980s, the investment of the Muslim Brotherhood in charitable associations was encouraged by the public authorities as part of the 'compromise' with the Muslim Brotherhood (Ben Néfissa and Hanafi, 2002). In Algeria, charitable associations with a religious referent 'converted' into partisan activism as soon as the FIS (Islamic Salvation Front) was born in 1988. Similarly, Morocco's Justice and Development Party (PJD) is the product of Islamist associations. Notably, the MUR (Unity and Reform Movement), a structure within the party, federates numerous associations that maintain the party's ties to its base. In other words, in Tunisia, contrary to other countries, the Islamist-based associative milieu could only take a formal shape in the context of the democratic transition, a fluid context characterized by the reconfiguration of power relationships.<sup>ii</sup> In this regard, this article is valuable in reaching beyond the standard literature on the Tunisian transition, which tends to focus on political parties and democratisation processes. In addition to the legalisation of Ennahda – which occurred during the

first free elections in October 2011 as a mass party with a religious orientation – civil society has become a new space of Islamic activism. Indeed, religiously based associations developed as new engagement spaces for an Islamic public made of Ennahda’s activists, Salafi actors, and a larger pious public not necessarily interested in politics (Merone et al., 2018). Despite the heterogeneity of this milieu, most religious-based associations were founded by Islamist activists, given the rootedness that the Movement had in the social fabric. Being composed of both the old generation of activists and a new generation of activists who did not experience militancy within the movement from its origins, also the Islamist constellation displays a variegated public.

This article investigates the forms of socio-political engagement of this heterogeneous group by demonstrating how extra-party engagement in a hostile political environment eventually transforms activists’ positions vis-à-vis politics.<sup>iii</sup> In doing so, it explores the relational dynamics between Islamist activists engaged in the civil society sphere and the Ennahda party from the fall of the authoritarian regime in 2011 until the last elections of 2019, when the Islamist party lost more than one-third of its electorate. In other words, and more specifically, this study investigates how the associations originally founded by Islamist activists have positioned themselves vis-à-vis the party’s changing political agenda. The overall goal of the article is to account for the broader implications of extra-party forms of engagement in the transformation of Islamism (or Political Islam) in Tunisia.

Drawing on a social movement theory’s relational approach, this article challenges a linear and one-dimensional understanding of the transformation of Political Islam by casting light on the activists’ mobilisation strategies outside the political party. In this regard, resource mobilisation theories allow us to unpack the complex transformative dynamics of the Islamist movement, including its centripetal and centrifugal trajectories.

Results show that, while in a context of political change characterized by a constraining environment, the strategy of party cadres may undergo a process of ideological transformation, activists who mobilize outside the party can follow somewhat different trajectories. Findings reveal

that some initially closely related activists to the Islamist party have followed different repertoires and logics of action. This contribution shows how Islamist-based associations developed in Tunisia after 2011 have performed as independent players outside the political party by creating new *arenas* of mobilisation (associations). As shown in the analysis, some Islamist activists engaged in the civil society sphere have kept a formal distance from politics by professionalizing their association according to neoliberal development projects incentivized by the massive intervention of international donors. Others have followed a logic of complementarity with the political party by carrying out a sort of ‘division of labor in light of the specialisation’ of the party in political affairs; others instead challenged the party by mobilizing for political alternatives. As demonstrated in this contribution, these three trajectories are *not* mutually exclusive, but their combination results in hybrid forms of transformation of Political Islam in post-authoritarian Tunisia.

## **Methods**

The article is based on field research conducted from 2015 to 2019 in Tunisia, during a period characterized by profound political change as part of the transition process that started in 2011. The sample consists of 120 Islamist-based associations located in four governorates which are representatively exhaustive of the overall country from a geographical, political, and social point of view. The first is Grand Tunis (including the governorates of Tunis, Manouba, Ariana, and Ben Arous), where international opportunities are easier for local associations, as most donors’ offices are located in the capital. The third location is the governorate of Sfax, the second most developed city after Tunis, which has always been conceived as the socio-political counterweight to the capital. The third is Siliana, a north-western region registering the lowest development index of the country after Kasserine and Sidi Bouzid. The fourth site of the investigation is Medenine, far from the centers of power related to the capital, in the extreme south of the country, at the border with Libya. As for Siliana's governorate, the region was persistently overlooked regarding welfare policies during the Bourguiba and Ben Ali’s regimes.

Despite the regional differences, all associations analyzed were founded by Islamist activists (activists taking their origins from the movement Ennahda), claiming civil society as an innovative sphere of engagement alongside or beyond the political party. The research consisted of analyzing the multi-positionality of the associations' members in different spheres of engagement, scrutinizing the political imaginary of associations' founding members, investigating the associations' daily activities, and unpacking the associations' socio-political networks in the four governorates under study.

Data collection combined semi-structured interviews with activists engaged in religious associations, in the party, or in both spheres of engagement at the same time; participant observation of daily associations' activities; document analysis of the original material produced by the associations; data scanning of the social media platforms (Facebook and Twitter) used by the associations' leaders<sup>iv</sup>

### **Islamism from a relational perspective: structure, agency, and interactions**

The transformation of Islamist parties worldwide pushed many scholars to focus on their ideological change and the reasons for and the implications. Literature draws upon two main theoretical frameworks. The first one is the 'inclusion-moderation' theory, according to which the participation of Islamists in institutional politics results in their progressive moderation while their repression leads to radicalisation (Schwedler and Schwedler, 2006; Wiktorowicz, 2004). While highlighting the normative biases of the inclusion-moderation thesis, several works propose to broaden the analytical perspective by looking at the interactions that Islamist parties develop, not only with the state but also with all social and political forces (Schwedler, 2013; Gana et al. 2023). Others invited to pay more attention to the different activities deployed by Islamist organisations and the resources they devote to them (Clark, 2004; Wickam, 2005)

The second most popular framework is the theory of post-Islamism. Proposed initially by Asef Bayat, it refers to the "exhaustion of Islamism as a symbol and source of legitimacy, the trend towards

secularisation of religion and the appeal to limit the political role of religion” (Bayat 1996: 46). The thesis of post-Islamism is later taken up by Olivier Roy, according to whom the Islamists’ move to formal (professional) politics entails the failure of the original political project - of transformation of state and society according to Islamic principles - and its evolution towards a conservative democratic agenda (Roy 1992, 1999). Although Roy argues that, despite its failure as a political project, Islamism remains a factor in social mobilisation (1999), the analysis remains focused on the evolution of political discourse and the institutional dimension of political parties. Most of the academic literature inspired by the post-Islamist theory and focusing on such transformations has neglected the multi-positionality of Islamist activists in other spheres of socio-political engagement, such as the associational field.

Drawing on a social movement’s relational perspective, the present study investigates the variety of situated interactions involving Islamist activists between the party and the associational field over time. In doing so, it highlights the movement’s non-linear and multi-faceted ideological and organisational transformations beyond changes at the party level. This contribution thus looks at the Tunisian Islamist movement as a heterogeneous constellation of actors made of individuals and organisations, where the party is just one of the components. By looking at the political party as just one social movement organisation of the Islamist ecosystem, this article accounts for the complexity of the ideological and political transformation of Political Islam in a context of political change such as in authoritarian Tunisia.

As also acknowledged by Asef Bayat (2005), the perspectives developed by the social movement theory can help illuminate the dynamic aspects of Islamist movements. Indeed, Islamism is dynamic as all the other social movements, in “constant flow and motion” (Bayat 2005: 897). As he said: “Considering social movements in motion is a crucial issue. For it emphasizes that the concerns, focus and even the direction of movements may change over time due to internal and,

especially, external factors” (*ibid.*). This article accounts for such mutations through a situated analysis by applying a social movement's relational approach.

Taking a social movement relational perspective as an analytical tool implies the analysis of ‘fields’ or ‘arenas’ of interactions rather than investigating the relationship between structure and agents (Jasper, 2004; Fligstein and McAdam, 2012; McGarry et al. 2016). According to Jasper, “we must recognize the full panoply of players' goals, meanings, and feelings, rather than reducing them to a mathematically tractable minimum” (Jasper, 2004: 4). Thus, the study of mobilisation dynamics demands a more in-depth analysis of the actor's interactive dynamics to make sense of what they interpret as political opportunities or constraints at specific moments in time. Strategic interactionism theoretically subtends social movements' middle-range theories, such as the resource mobilisation theory (McCarthy and Zald, 1977). In a given situation, activists might strategically rely on different kinds of resources (symbolic or material, including techniques, networks, and the creation of social movement organisations) as part of their strategy, which might be objective or subjective (*ibid.*).

Nothing exceptional in Islam should make Islamist movements unfit for using social movement theories (Wiktorowicz, 2003; Clark, 2004; Wickham, 2005; Donker, 2013). Wiktorowicz, for instance, applied the ‘Resource Mobilisation Theory’ to Salafist and Muslim Brotherhood Islamist mobilisation in Jordan by arguing that institutionalisation is a prerequisite for obtaining the resources needed for mobilisation and its eventual success. Wickham explicitly applied SMT to Islamic movements in Egypt by analyzing how Islamists have found avenues for mobilizing in the repressive environment of Mubarak's regime. Clark employed SMT in analyzing Islamist networks in Egypt, Jordan, and Yemen, and at a second stage, investigating alliance structures between Islamist and non-Islamist movements. In recent works on social movements in North Africa and the Middle East, some authors have adopted a relational perspective by highlighting the role of local networks (Volpi and Jasper, 2017; Volpi and Clark, 2019). However, these contributions have centered mainly on protest



events and, in general terms, on conflicts between state and society; moreover, this recent literature has focused chiefly on Islamic actors as monolithic ‘challengers’ of the status quo.

This contribution goes beyond the existing literature from an empirical and theoretical perspective. First, drawing on the exemplary case of Tunisian Islamist-based associations, it expands the analysis of the transformations of Islamic activism outside party politics at a time of profound change in Ennahda's political agenda. Secondly, highlighting the hybrid paths of Islamic activism breaks a linear and monolithic interpretation of the transformation of political Islam in the country.

### **The specialisation of Ennahda in political affairs and the Islamic civil society**

Tunisian Islamism developed in the 1970s as an Islamic grassroots community (*jama'a*) inspired by the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhoods (*jama'a al-Islamiyya*) and conceived the religion and politics as a whole (*shumuliyya*).<sup>v</sup> In light of this, Islam was intended as a global practice. With the partial liberalisation of the 1980s, the religious group transformed itself into a political movement called ‘the Movement of the Islamic Tendency’ (*harakat Ittijah al-Islami*).

Over time the Movement has undertaken a transformation that evolved into a ‘specialisation’ in a political party. In 1989, President Ben Ali, who initially seemed favorable to a policy of inclusion, allowed the party's creation. To comply with Tunisian laws banning religious parties, Rached Ghannouchi, the party leader, changed the organisation's name from the Movement of Islamic Tendency (MIT) into Movement Ennahda (*Harakat Ennahdha*), meaning ‘rebirth,’ thus abandoning any Islamic reference. The Movement's religious reference was, however, kept alive thanks to some activists engaging in grassroots activities in secretive conditions.<sup>vi</sup>

The party's ideological transformation remained the fundamental concept of Ennahda's public discourse from early 2011 onwards (Cavatorta and Merone, 2013; 2015). At the IX Congress held in June 2012, Ennahda's leadership prompted a debate on the division in the party's activities between ‘preaching’ (*da'wa*, which means ‘call’) and ‘politics,’ proposing that the group's more conservative

members participate in civil society independently from party politics (McCarthy, 2015). Thus, the legitimisation of the social sphere of the movement became an important political strategy for Ennahda after 2011. Indeed, after the fall of the authoritarian regime, many Islamist activists decided to engage in the associative field. Thousands of associations with religious references appeared as a means of ‘parallel’ or ‘alternative’ engagement to the party. According to a former MIT activist: “especially at the start, activists were engaged in both spheres”.<sup>vii</sup> With the multi-positionality of activists, the boundaries between political and associative activity are blurred. Mohamed, president of a Sfax charity and former activist of MIT, explains: “at the beginning, there was not a real distinction between political activity and social activity.”<sup>viii</sup>

The party has transformed over the years in a context characterized by high pressure linked to the increasing polarisation in the country and by the presence of the remnants of the old regime (Cavatorta and Merone, 2015). In 2012, against a background of increasing socio-political conflict, part of the old regime's allies gathered the country's anti-Islamist forces into a new party, Nidaa Tounès, whose initial objective was to thwart the rising power of the Ennahda party. Thus, according to the calculations of Ennahda’s leaders at that time, any disruption of the constitutional process or a widespread impression of political instability risked bringing the former regime back onto the stage.

After the political assassinations of two opposition activists (Chokri Belaid and Mohamed Brahmi) and the military coup in Egypt that removed the Muslim Brotherhood from power in July 2013, the pressure against the party reached its peak with thousands of protesters demanding the dissolution of the National Constituent Assembly and the ousting of the government of Ali Laarayedh (Ennahda). The party thus undertook a series of actions to increase its legitimacy among secular forces. In essence, it made compromises on a draft of the Constitution under discussion at the time by abandoning the idea of inserting *sharia*, it cut its ties with Salafi organisations dramatically, and it agreed to relinquish power in favor of a technocratic government in January 2014. Undoubtedly, the summer of 2013 marked a watershed: from this moment, Ennahda’s discourse revolved around

its detachment from the Islamist project of transformation of Tunisian politics and society. Moreover, the victory of the party Nidaa Tounès in the 2014 elections paved the way for an unexpected coalition government. Several activists perceived the compromise between Islamists and the forces of the old regime as a betrayal of revolutionary principles.

At the the10th party Congress held in May 2016, the party leader declared: “There is no longer any justification for political Islam in Tunisia.”<sup>x</sup> This statement was followed by the decision of the party’s leadership to engage in the process of specialisation (*taḥaṣṣus*), aiming to separate the political from the religious dimension. This measure thus entailed a distinction between two parts of the same political group: the partisan dimension (*hizb*) and the social movement (*haraka*). As Ghannouchi (2016) declared: “Ennahda has fully embraced a new identity as a party of Muslim democrats. The organisation is no longer both a political party and a social movement. It has ended its religious activities and now focuses only on politics”.

This measure was perceived as unnatural by several currents within the Islamist community as it envisages a distinction between two dimensions – religion and politics – which are intertwined. Thus, from being representative of the overall Islamist constellation, the specialisation process created a split between those who refuse such a change in the name of the original Islamist ideal and those who think that the new historical juncture demands a separation of politics and preaching. The following pages describe how Islamist activists engaged in the civil society sphere dealing with such a controversial issue.

### **The rise of Islamic associations and their relationship with Ennahda until 2014**

After the fall of the Ben Ali regime, thanks to Decree-law No. 88, dated September 2011, hundreds of associations with a religious orientation have appeared in the renewed public space.<sup>x</sup> Islamist activists played an essential role in creating many of them. First, the network of ancient activists developed during their exile in Europe was an important factor driving the creation of new spaces of

socio-political engagement after the revolution. Notably, the solidarity network of comrades built up abroad by prominent figures of the Islamist movement represented a symbolic and material resource for creating new associations in Tunisia. Diasporic groups function as anchors for local associations. International anchoring includes various types of transnational interactions. Activists can simply communicate online with other activists in host countries to get relevant information; they can set up different forms of solidarity networks to attain political goals or to carry out specific campaigns at the local level; receive material resources for the everyday activities of their associations; receive intangible resources, such as training cycles and other types of information; set up institutionalized international partnerships. Second, contrarily to leftist and secular forces, the Islamist movement born in the 1970s could count on a sound network supporting grassroots activities, which during the authoritarian regime were conducted in secretive conditions but that after 2011 could re-emerge in a liberalized socio-political landscape.

Thanks to the support of transnational and local solidarity networks, three main types of Islamic-based activism mushroomed in the country after the fall of Ben Ali's regime. First, charitable associations (*al-jam'iyât al-khayriyya*) have become one of the most visible forms of the post-revolutionary activism of Islamic inspiration. The decision of the many activists to engage in the charitable sector after the revolution represented a sort of 'revenge' on the old regime's opponents, a form of pointed criticism of the clientelist practices in force under the control of Ben Ali.

The second type of Islamic form of Islamic engagement rooted in the associational milieu is the post-revolutionary religious schools (Merone et al., 2018). According to the Imam of the S. association, created after 2011, the Quranic schools that emerged after the revolution questioned the Islamic education sponsored during the authoritarian regime: "During Ben Ali's regime, religious education was based on a 'pietist' style of teaching religion. This approach envisaged a domesticated Islam as an instrument of societal control to include like-minded groups and to exclude the challengers, such as the Islamist movement".<sup>xi</sup> After the 2011 revolution, a new wave of religious

education emerged into the public space, calling into question the traditionally religious educational system, considered an ideological instrument of the ruling elite under Ben Ali (Merone et al., 2018). According to the president of the Q. association, “before the revolution, the people did not have access to true Islam: all the imams belonged to the RCD.”<sup>xii</sup>

The third form of Islamic activism is the rise of new, young, and charismatic preachers acting in more informal public spaces, such as *cafès* or public squares (Merone et al., 2018). For example, in the city of Sfax, preaching activities have evolved around charismatic imams, such as Mohamed Affès, the preacher of the Great Mosque of Sfax, and Ridha Jaouadi, imam of the Lakhmi Mosque and president of the association of imams. Since 2011, these new religious figures have been praised as a positive byproduct of the revolution by the Islamic community, in contrast to the so-called ‘Islam of state’ characterized by the top-down appointment of imams. According to this revolutionary narrative, after the fall of the authoritarian regime, the new imams “have to be appointed by the people, by the Islamic community.”<sup>xiii</sup>

As immediately after the revolution, many associations formed by former activists of the movement grew up spontaneously over the time some Ennahda’s charismatic leaders, such as Habib Ellouze, Sadok Chourou, and Sahbi Atigue, historical leaders of the Movement since its origins in the ‘70s, tried to stand out as connectors of spaces between the two spheres of engagement (Merone et al., 2018). As shown in the following sections, if, on the one hand, the party leaders attempted to exert hegemonic control over the religious-based associational camp, on the other hand, Islamist activists engaged in the associations have followed hybrid pathways of mobilisation.

From 2011 to 2013, Tunisia experienced a growing confrontation between the ‘Islamist’ and ‘modernist’ forces around constitutional issues. In particular, the various constitutional projects drawn up within the National Constituent Assembly were symptomatic of these two antagonistic visions of Tunisian politics (Gobe and Chouikha, 2014). The associative sphere reflected this polarisation until 2013. The strong presence of Ennahda activists in the associative world, especially

in charity associations, had thus brought the opposition forces – including advocacy and human rights associations, ideologically close to the leftist political forces – to accuse the party of indirectly recreating a system of hegemony rooted in the social fabric, like the RCD under the regime of Ben Ali. Thus, 2012 saw the mobilisation of several associations of religious inspiration counteracting the “political attack” of secular forces.<sup>xiv</sup> The Tunisian Front of Islamic Associations (*al-jabhat al-tunisiyya al-jami'iat al-islamiyya*), composed of preaching and charitable associations, aimed to bring together Tunisian Islamic forces to “fight against secularism in Tunisia, the desecration of Islam and for the insertion of sharia in the constitution.”<sup>xv</sup>

The Front was active in 2012 and 2013, as the main organizer of demonstrations outside of the Constituent Assembly. On March 16, 2012, it organized a demonstration in which thousands of Tunisians took part outside the ANC headquarters to demand the application of *sharia* law in the country's future constitution.<sup>xvi</sup> On September 14, the Front organized a march from the *Al-Fath* Mosque to the American embassy. It supported the sit-in in front of the embassy to express its dissatisfaction with the screening of *Persepolis*, a film that allegedly insulted the prophet on the private television channel Nessma TV. During the mobilisations aimed at overthrowing the Ennahda government, the Front participated in support of the party (Merone et al., 2018).

The political roots of religious associations inevitably placed them in a game of confrontation with secular and leftist associations. During the crisis of the summer of 2013, opposition activists engaged in civil society tried to launch their version of the Egyptian protest movement *Tamarod*, which during the same period had led to the dismissal of President Mohamed Morsi. Like its Egyptian namesake, the Tunisian group accused Tunisian Islamists of causing the country's political and economic crisis. Throughout this period, Tunisia witnessed various mobilisations and counter-mobilisations of different civil society groups (secular or religious), which reflected the country's growing political polarisation.

In the aftermath of the political crisis, the technocratic government of Mehdi Jomaa (independent), who took office in January 2014, launched a campaign to restore state control over mosques and Islamic associations. Activities accused of being of a political nature linked to Ennahda and causing the Islamisation of Tunisian society were also targets of securitisation measures. Several charitable associations with a religious orientation became the target of police operations to verify the legality of their activities. The primary pressure and control mechanism concerned the accounting and financing procedures. Since the 2015 attacks, many associations have been sanctioned through this channel for “concealment of illicit financing linked to terrorist activities.”<sup>xvii</sup> Sanctions varied from freezing the association's activities from one to three months or a permanent ban.

Interviewees from several associations insist that there was an evident change in state control measures after 2014 in connection with the weakening of Ennahda at the national level. The president of a charitable association explains: “The state's measures are an attack against Ennahda. I wonder why the state did not control secular charitable associations as well”.<sup>xviii</sup> While, on the one hand, Ennahda tried to mediate between secular forces and its Islamic constituency, on the other, it also exploited the situation to push the party's activists engaged in civil society to engage in a professionalisation that would reflect the separation between *da'wa* and politics. Thus, several party officials left the boards of Islamic associations once elected to the *choura* and vice versa; some members of the *choura*, in turn, left the party to focus on the activities of their associations and decided to devote themselves exclusively to the social sphere. As we will see in the next section, this process has encouraged and facilitated a parallel specialisation of Islamic associations in ‘civil society affairs.’

### **Specialising in ‘civil society’: the professionalisation of Islamic associations**

Professionalisation, as a trajectory of Islamist activists engaged in the associative field, can be interpreted according to several drivers: the state's crescent securitisation targeting the most politicized associations, the Ennahda's process of specialisation, the massive intervention of Western

international donors, the latter operating extensively in the country since 2011 with their windows of opportunities and constraints. Moreover, as shown by data, this associational practice went in parallel with the state's continued disengagement from the socio-economic sphere and a narrative on 'civil society' framed in neoliberal terms, according to which associations act as the state's subsidiary agents in the developmental sector.

Especially from 2014 onwards, associations of religious inspiration have been gradually transformed in terms of their resources' mobilisation, organisational structure, and activities about the Ennahda's party. As a former activist of MIT and president of a charitable association based in Tunis says: "We are looking to specialize in civil society, while Ennahda specializes in political affairs."<sup>xxix</sup> To renew their legitimacy vis-à-vis the state and Western donors, several associative actors interviewed explained the desire of their organisation to broaden the range of activities to other sectors, like that of social development (*tanmia ijtima'ia*) or human development (*tanmia bashariyya*). Several associations interviewed indicated that they had embarked on organizing seminars and workshops on *capacity building*, *good practices*, and *good governance*, according to a logic of professionalisation required by international funding bodies (Sigillò, 2020).<sup>xx</sup> The main aim of this new effort has been to dispel the general suspicion of financial relations between Islamist charities and donors from the Gulf. As mentioned by an activist in a charitable association in Ettadhamen, a popular neighborhood on the outskirts of Tunis: "We must respect the standards of expertise and technical efficiency required by Western donors as the government does not allow us to make money from other Arab countries".<sup>xxi</sup>

This change has had a striking impact on how charities present themselves to the public. Charitable associations have begun a process of transformation in each region under investigation. This transformation is reflected in a new management style of their practices, with a focus on rationalized and standardized financial management. Many associations have hired an accounting expert "to avoid problems with the State."<sup>xxii</sup> It is significant that during interviews with the



associations' executive boards, the members of such boards usually insist on showing the financial records to their interlocutors, thus revealing concern for transparency and the desire to legitimize management procedures. The professionalisation of associations has thus become good practice and a tool to defend associations, as one exponent puts it, from "the attack of the State [...]. We must improve our work to avoid any attack concerning bureaucratic issues. The accounts and registers are in order, with the full list of financial transactions from our national and international donors."<sup>xxiii</sup>

During the interviews, when asked about their primary identity, several activists refrained from using the terms 'Islamic' and 'religious.'<sup>xxiv</sup> A considerable number of associations have changed their names. For example, the charity *Rahma* (Mercy) changed its name in 2014, adopting a new name with no religious reference; it has also expanded its sphere of activity to social development and local governance. The charitable association *Marhama*, whose president is the former Ennahda leader Moshen Jandoubi, changed its name to OTDS (*Organisation Tunisienne pour le Développement Social*).<sup>xxv</sup> In the brochure presenting the characteristics of the association, we read that its mission is divided into four "strategical axes": promotion of *social solidarity economy*; development of partnerships and networks among local associations, and facilitating their collaboration with local administration and international institutions; contributing to reinforcing technical skills of civil society actors, such as their capacity to make pressure on institutions and strengthening the capacity of OTDS according to the principles of quality management. Moreover, the association built up a parallel observatory with the task of providing legal services to the members of its association and the network of local associations under its umbrella. This professional device is strategically important due to the state's legal injunctions against charitable associations. Overall, this discourse reveals a strategy to obtain renewed legitimacy at the local and international levels.

In 2015, OTDS fostered the activation of a new network of charitable associations throughout the country, only after having assured a training package on capacity building. The primary objective is to create a "specialized network"<sup>xxvi</sup> to divide work into zones of interventions and create shared databases of beneficiaries.

The trajectory of professionalisation did not seem to prevent associative members from perceiving themselves as part of an Islamic community. According to several association members, professionalisation should be linked to networking strategies: “we must become professional and create networks to resist the aggression of the State; in other words, we must coordinate.” Therefore, professionalisation has become a survival strategy, especially for those associations that government controls have targeted since 2014. The professionalisation process has also affected the associative field organisational structure: the political failure of the Tunisian Front of Islamic Associations has given way to rising professionalized networks specialized in specific sectors of activity. Emblematic examples are the network of charitable associations in the governorate of Sfax, the network of local governance in Siliana, and the network of social development in Médenine. From this perspective, the ‘sectorialisation’ and ‘managerialisation’ of associative activities seem to represent a survival strategy in the hands of the associations after a political crisis that had strongly delegitimized and weakened the country’s Islamist actors. As R., an old activist of the movement and leader of a *da’wa* association said:

Thanks to specialisation, the Islamist public sphere is now diversified, reducing the risk of secular forces weakening the movement. Our association is part of the movement, although it acts independently from the party.<sup>xxvii</sup>

In this regard, it is interesting to note that not all the activists interviewed and oriented in the process of professionalisation present their associations as part of the movement, at least on the level of daily practices. As mentioned by the president of another charity based in Tunis:

Our association is separated from the Islamist constellation; even if we like Ennahda, we don’t mobilize for *sharia*; we think about the well-being of all the citizens. Every day we think about projects and grants, not establishing Islamic politics. Winning development grants is our main concern now, so to make something to change the country.<sup>xxviii</sup>

## **The reconfiguration of an associational network as a party's complementary sphere**

Despite the professionalisation's trajectory, many activists continue to perceive themselves as part of an Islamist network, where the association is just one of the nodes. Indeed, if, on the one hand, the primary institutional consequence of the 'specialisation' is the separation of careers between the party and associations' leaders and the related professionalisation of the two spheres of engagement, on the other hand, some activists, symbolic figures within the party, have kept their positions in the two fields, such as the sheik Habib Ellouze. In this regard, a second trajectory of the associative sphere is that of complementarity vis-à-vis the party.<sup>xxix</sup>

While some associations' founders officially renounced claims to their associations' Islamic identity and downplayed the religious motivations underlying their activities to defend themselves against the accusation of politicisation, they continue to mobilize for the defense of Islamic values within the framework of an associative network. The mobilisations organized against the proposals of constitutional amendments suggested by the Individual Freedoms and Equality Committee founded by former president Beji Caid Essebsi represented an exemplary case.<sup>xxx</sup> In August 2018, members of Islamic associations took to the streets to protest the proposals of legislative reforms relating to individual freedoms in the country, which were supposed to be at odds with the Quran's norms and principles. However, this mobilisation was far from spontaneous; a network of da'wa associations organized it. The demonstrators marched with a banner bearing the inscription "The Quran before any other text" to affirm the primacy of the sacred text over civil law. They accused the Commission of having acted against the teachings of Islam. This mobilisation echoed the demonstrations organised by the Front of Islamic Associations in 2012-2013 (Gana and Sigillò, 2019).

Still, one significant difference: the initiative was qualified by its promoters as a "civil society mobilisation"<sup>xxxi</sup> and not as a political action. This shifting narrative reflects Ennahda's specialisation strategy from the civil society perspective. It prevents the party from being accused by secular forces

of pursuing an Islamist agenda at the political level. According to a former MIT activist and secretary-general of the association D.: “we mobilize because Ennahda cannot overexpose itself; it must compromise with the country's secular forces.”<sup>xxxii</sup> Also, as stated by the spokesperson for the Collective Q. and a former activist of the MIT as well:

Some Islamist activists participate, but they are no longer with the party as they decided to engage in the associative sector. It is a different logic, even if we share the same values.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

Several activists thus justify the party's specialisation to legitimize their work. As posited by some activists: “According to our religion, we must develop preaching activities from the grassroots, and not from the top. The party is a too hierarchical structure”.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Thus, Islamic activists rooted in the social fabric consider associations to be the actual activators of Islamic values, which must be progressively neglected by the party. In light of this, they ultimately legitimize the civil nature of the party, which has now formally engaged in a policy of compromise with the secular forces. This position is confirmed by party officials, who see the mobilisation of associations as a kind of ‘delegation’ of religious affairs to civil society within the framework of specialisation:

The party cannot use religion as an argument. The specialisation process has made it possible to distinguish the two fields, politics, and religion, so it is civil society that must mobilize for religious issues.<sup>xxxv</sup>

The analysis of the 2018 mobilisations thus brings out a dynamic of reconfiguration of a network of Islamic inspiration, which distances itself formally from the Ennahda party but is compatible with the process of party specialisation, according to a logic of complementarity.

Some activists who are part of the Collective underline the positive effects of specialisation on the Islamic movement. As stated by the secretary-general of D., the association founded by H. Ellouze:

Thanks to specialisation, the Islamic public sphere has been diversified, which reduces the risk of being undermined as a movement by the attacks of our political enemies. We are an elastic force; we adapt.<sup>xxxvi</sup>

Overall, if, on the one hand, some activists, notoriously the old activists of the movement, experienced the specialisation as a betrayal of the Islamist ideology, other activists, especially party members who also have a role in the associations, justified the specialisation as a necessary ‘division of competences’ a survival strategy for the movement after a political crisis that had strongly delegitimized Ennahda.

### **Political distancing: reconciliation with Salafi currents ‘from below.’**

The anti-COLIBE mobilisations involved other participants besides Ennahda's activists, namely Salafi actors who had broken off relations with the Islamist party in 2013 and joined the associative field. As stated by an interviewee: “We are not at all with Ennahda and its political agenda, but at this moment, we have the same objective: the defense of Islam with all possible means. So, it’s a moral duty to mobilize together”.<sup>xxxvii</sup> A closer look shows that the 2018 protests represented an opportunity to re-establish new ties between the two groups. A reconciliation below has recently occurred between Islamist and Salafi actors by establishing and developing localized informal networks and shared associative activities in several country cities.

This phenomenon pertains to the third trajectory of Islamist activists who distinguished themselves in their critical positions vis-à-vis Ennahda due to intense frustration and a sense of betrayal, which led them to consider joining others with alternative political solutions. These activists mainly distanced themselves from the party after its break with the Salafi movements and the alliance with the secular forces linked to the old regime. Discontent has notably increased among Islamist activists following the party's new compromise policy with secular forces and specialisation strategy. In this regard, the associative field has progressively emerged as an alternative political arena defending Islamic principles and practices, gradually abandoned by the party. Interviews show the

rise of Islamic activists' narratives of a "betrayed revolution," characterized by attacks against the state and Ennahda itself, considered by several among them to be part of the "corrupt establishment disconnected from real society."<sup>xxxviii</sup> As posited by a former activist of the movement who left Ennahda well before 2011, when he started seeing that "the party was also seeking to obtain power at the cost of abandoning Islamic principles":<sup>xxxix</sup>

The party is now playing 'professional' politics, negotiating compromises with the old regime. Because of this, the party has distanced itself from the Tunisian people and the values of Islam. I prefer to focus on concrete things, like getting involved in civil society in the name of God.<sup>xl</sup>

The so-called Jaouadi affair is an emblematic example of this new trend. During the government's campaign against unofficial imams in the framework of the "war against terrorism," launched in 2015, Imam Ridha Jaouadi was dismissed by the government with the official accusation of "inciting radicalisation"<sup>xli</sup>. The exclusion of the young sheiks and imams acclaimed after the revolution represents the start of a new phase in which the party leadership has taken significant decisions. Jaouadi's replacement is an imam chosen by the Minister of Religious Affairs. The Lakhmi association, of which Jaouadi is the president, launched a protest campaign against the 'government of compromise,' of which Ennahda is a part, and accused it of violating freedom of worship. The mobilisation of the Sfaxian Islamic community in support of Imam Jaouadi has led to claims for a system of state religious control, similar to what was in place during the Ben Ali regime. As one exponent of the protest put it, "the imams must be chosen by the Tunisian people, not by the state or party officials, as happened during the authoritarian regime"; "Ennahda has become like the RCD."

In this context, some activists engaged in the associative sector seized the opportunity to recombine the link between the political and the religious dimensions, a core nexus eventually dropped out by the party's agenda. As stated by the imam Jaouadi: "*da'wa* is the true politics, and it must be built from the grassroots, not from bourgeois parties, like Ennahda."<sup>xlii</sup> From this perspective,

several activists engaged in the associative sector conceive their social engagement as the purest (political) form of Islamic activism (when religion and politics are two intertwined parts of the same unity), in so doing following the logic of reconfiguration of a unified Islamic network outside the party.

Several activists from this milieu recently joined a new political platform, *Itilaf al-Karama* (the Coalition of Dignity), positioned as the country's fourth political actor at the legislative elections in October 2019. Interestingly, the Coalition does not have an official religious orientation and gathers a heterogeneous group of activists with variegated backgrounds.<sup>xliii</sup> Several of them stem from the associative field mentioned above. Interestingly, many Coalition members participated in the demonstrations supporting the Ennahda party in the 2012-2013 mobilisations; however, after the party's pragmatic turn, they decided to join a political alternative.

The Coalition presented itself as a disruptive political force during the electoral campaign. It strongly criticized the compromise between the Islamist party and the old regime, "an elitist agreement established at the expense of the revolutionary principles"<sup>xliv</sup>. The Coalition adopted radical registers against the "corrupted establishment," defined as "the people who now rule Tunisia, the true terrorists who kill the Tunisian people with their corrupted policies."<sup>xlv</sup> As stated by some Ennahda activists who joined the Coalition: "I could not stand a compromise with those who tortured my family"; "Ennahda made alliances with the old regime, I can't forgive the party for this choice"; "I joined Itilaf Karama because I want to recover my dignity as an Islamic activist."<sup>xlvi</sup>

Despite its non-religious character, the Coalition presented itself as a conservative force seeking to restore the traditional values and institutions neglected by the old regime in the national reforms inspired by a modern Western state model. The latter was not sufficiently rejected by the Ennahda party once in power. However, the Coalition's primary mission is to fulfill the unaccomplished goals of the revolution, first and foremost socio-economic justice, not to pursue an

Islamist agenda (Blanc and Sigillò, 2019). In this regard, this third trajectory of Islamist activists also represents a hybrid form of Islamic activism.

## **Conclusion**

The article outlined three intertwined trajectories of Islamic associations that have emerged since 2011 in Tunisia, revealing broader implications for understanding the evolution of Political Islam. The first trajectory is the associations' professionalisation parallel to the party's specialisation. While this is a somewhat generalized phenomenon in the MENA region (and beyond), in Tunisia, it has acquired a specific connotation in that this process was activated abruptly as a reaction to government repression against religious associations accepting funding from Islamic donors, in parallel with the Ennahda moderation.

The second trajectory sheds light on an associational milieu positioning as a party's subsidiary actor following the process of specialisation. Findings showed that some associations had proved to be the sphere of activation of Islamic values officially abandoned by Ennahda. This pathway can be interpreted as a strategy to prosecute Islamism through other means when the party risked being eradicated in the political sphere by secular forces. The analysis of the August 2018 mobilisations has shown how associations autonomously supported Ennahda's political stands from below, acting as 'safe-keepers' of Islamic values.

This research sheds light on a third trajectory: some activists engaged in Islamic associations have recently adopted a more critical stand vis-à-vis the party. Most of the actors of this associative network are former activists of the movement who experienced Ennahda's specialisation as a betrayal. Some of them had already left the Movement before creating the party. Activists from this more radical milieu adopted a confrontational position vis-à-vis the party by developing narratives of resistance towards Ennahda's attempts to restore a regime of institutionalized Islam under state control and the compromise with secular forces their international allies. Recent protests for



defending Islamic values and creating a new list for the last elections indicate a rapprochement between the Salafist currents, excluded by the political sphere in 2013, and former Ennahda activists, stemming from a joint mobilisation within the associative sphere. Also, data showed that associations mobilised according to a network reconfiguration logic that challenged the party to join a political alternative.

The three trajectories cast the light on a heterogeneous movement in which activists engaged in the associational field have established variegated relationships with the party. If immediately after the revolution, associations developed as a societal force close to Ennahda, after the political crisis in 2013 and the state's crackdown in 2014, they have gradually taken variegated stands towards the party. Associations can embark on a path of professionalisation that can lead to their depoliticisation, or they can remain an informal part of the Islamist constellation despite no longer having the party as a symbolic and material reference, or they can formally break away from the party ideology and move closer to other political realities.

Overall, the results suggest a scenario beyond the literature on 'moderation through exclusion.' On the one hand, the Islamist Movement seems to have the capacity to adapt to the constraining context by activists mobilizing symbolic and material resources through the work of the Islamic-based associational sector. On the other hand, findings also show that the party's and associations' interactions are not necessarily a-priori-designed by the party's leadership. Activists follow multiple logics of action depending on the relational dynamics that their association can establish with the party and with other actors such as the state, international donors, secular associations, and Salafi actors.

Finally, a relational approach is essential to study the transformation of Islamism beyond party politics. A broader perspective is necessary to understand better how the movement has changed over time and make more accurate assumptions about the evolution of the Islamist party in an increasingly hostile environment. Indeed, this analysis is crucial, especially in a time of profound political crisis

that Ennahda is going through after President Kaïs Saïed decided to freeze parliamentary activities on 25 July 2021 and to dissolve the parliament led by Ghannouchi on 22 March 2022. These measures came after widespread frustration with the government's inability to handle the Covid-19 pandemic crisis. The party responded to these measures by assessing the president's decisions as a coup against popular legitimacy, thus drawing part of its electorate into the streets to reject them. Despite the solidarity of several activists involved in the associative field, the protests in support of the party certainly do not resemble those of the first years after the revolution. It could be argued that despite the party's strategy of specialisation, which allowed some religiously based associations to address the party's Islamist agenda 'from below,' the depoliticisation of some activists on the one hand and the political radicalisation of others on the other may have contributed to further fragmentation of the movement, and consequently impoverished mass mobilisations in support of the party.

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## **Biographical note**

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<sup>i</sup> Islamism (or political Islam) is a revolutionary project aiming at transforming politics and society through Islamic-inspired reforms. According to the definition given by Olivier Roy, ‘Islamists’ are Islamic activist groups who see Islam as much a political ideology as a religion (Roy, 1992).

<sup>ii</sup> There was already a community of Islamist activists operating discreetly in Tunisia before 2011. This community fragmented after 2011, as new opportunities allowed many groups to flourish and pursue different objectives (McCarthy 2018).

<sup>iii</sup> After 2011, Islamic activism in Tunisia crystallized into two main forms of socio-political engagement: Islamism, represented by the party Ennahda, and Salafism, mainly composed of the party *Jabhat al-Islah* and the Salafi-jihadi movement *Ansar al-Sharia*. This article focuses on the trajectories of Islamist activists who drew their origins from the Tunisian Islamist movement or joined the Ennahda party after its full legalisation in 2011.

<sup>iv</sup> All research participants provided appropriate informed consent, as requested by the ethics committee of my university. To protect the anonymity of my informants, the names of associations and their members have been changed or not mentioned explicitly in the text.

<sup>v</sup> In this article, Islamism is intended as one specific form of Islamic activism. Other forms of Islamic activism in Tunisia involve Salafi or Sufi movements.

<sup>vi</sup> Author’s interviews with activists in the charitable sector in all four governorates under investigation.

<sup>vii</sup> Author’s interview, Tunis, May 2016.

<sup>viii</sup> Author’s interview, Sfax, May 2016.

<sup>ix</sup> [https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2016/05/19/rached-ghannouchi-il-n-y-a-plus-de-justification-a-l-islam-politique-en-tunisie\\_4921904\\_3210.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2016/05/19/rached-ghannouchi-il-n-y-a-plus-de-justification-a-l-islam-politique-en-tunisie_4921904_3210.html). (Accessed: 20 October 2022).

<sup>x</sup> Centre d’Information, de Formation, d’Études et de Documentation sur les Associations, [http://www.ifeda.org.tn/fr/index.php?lang=fr&id\\_page=5](http://www.ifeda.org.tn/fr/index.php?lang=fr&id_page=5). (Accessed : 13 September 2022).

<sup>xi</sup> Author’s interview, Tunis, July 2018.

<sup>xii</sup> The RCD (Rassemblement Constitutionnel Démocratique) was the quasi-hegemonic party under Ben Ali’s regime. Author’s interview, Tunis, July 2018.

<sup>xiii</sup> Author’s interview, Sfax, May 2016.

<sup>xiv</sup> Author’s interview extracts.

<sup>xv</sup> Facebook page of the Front of Islamic associations: <https://www.facebook.com/front.national.des.associations.islamiques>. (Accessed: 20 October 2022).

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<sup>xvi</sup> <https://www.france24.com/fr/20120316-tunisie-manifestation-tunis-milliers-charia-constitution-religion-politique-assemblee-coran-islam->

<sup>xvii</sup> Author's interview with the general director of the presidential administrative section dealing with the affairs of political parties and associations, Tunis, July 2018.

<sup>xviii</sup> Author's interview, Tunis, June 2018.

<sup>xix</sup> Author's interview, Tunis, October 2017.

<sup>xx</sup> Finding retrieved from author's interviews in the four governorates between 2015 and 2019.

<sup>xxi</sup> Author's interview with the president of a charitable association based in Ettadhamen, November 2016.

<sup>xxii</sup> Author's interview, Médenine, February 2017.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Author's interview with the president of a charitable association, Siliana, June 2016.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Author's interview extracts.

<sup>xxv</sup> Moshen Jendoubi, vice-president of OTDS, spent his exile with his family in Germany during the regime's repression in the '90s. This long period spent abroad allowed him to acquire sound expertise and to develop several strategic contacts, which nowadays embrace the association.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Author's interview with the president of the charitable network in Siliana, June 2016.

<sup>xxvii</sup> Author's interview, Tunis, July 2018.

<sup>xxviii</sup> Author's interview, Tunis, July 2019.

<sup>xxix</sup> Author's interview with H. Ellouze, Hammamet, May 2016.

<sup>xxx</sup> The Individual Liberties and Equality Commission (Colibe) was appointed by the former President of the Republic, Béji Caïd Essebsi, on August 13, 2017. It prepared a report on the country's legislative reforms regarding individual freedoms.

<sup>xxxi</sup> Author's interviews with demonstrators, Tunis and Sfax, October 2018.

<sup>xxxii</sup> Author's interview, Tunis, July 2018.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> Author's interview, Tunis, July 2018.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> Author's interview, Médenine, May 2017.

<sup>xxxv</sup> Author's interview with the party's spokesperson, Tunis, October 2018.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> Author's interview with the secretary-general of the association D., Tunis, June 2018.

<sup>xxxvii</sup> Author's interview with the president of a Salafi association banned in 2015, Tunis, August 2018.

<sup>xxxviii</sup> Statements were retrieved from activists' Facebook and Twitter profiles.

<sup>xxxix</sup> Author's interview with a former activist of the movement, Tunis, July 2019.

<sup>xl</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>xli</sup> <http://kapitalis.com/tunisie/2015/09/15/mosquee-sidi-lakhmi-de-sfax-limogeage-de-limam-radical-ridha-jaouadi/>.

(Accessed: 20 October 2022).

<sup>xlii</sup> Facebook page and Twitter profile of the imam Ridha Jaouadi.

<sup>xliii</sup> The Coalition comprises a wide array of diverse forces: Salafi actors, former Ennahda's activists, remnants of the dissolved Leagues for the Protection of the Revolution, independent journalists, and bloggers (Blanc and Sigillò, 2019).

<sup>xliv</sup> Author's interview with a member of Itilaf Karama, October 2019.

<sup>xlv</sup> Author's interview with former Ennahda activists who joined Itilaf Karama, Tunis, October 2019.

<sup>xlvi</sup> Author's interview with a former member of Ennahda who joined the Coalition, Tunis, October 2019.

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