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(Article begins on next page)

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Islamic Activism in Exile:
Reconfiguring Political Engagement Across Transnational Arenas

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Abstract

How does Islamic activism transform at the transnational level? Drawing on multi-sited fieldwork in Europe and North America, this article examines the trajectories of Islamist activists in exile and the arenas through which they sustain political engagement from abroad. Adopting an arena-based approach, it identifies four hybrid arenas in which Islamist-linked players interact with secular actors, organizations, and policy networks. Across these arenas, activists frequently participate in causes not explicitly framed in Islamic terms, including anti-authoritarian protests, humanitarian action, democratic advocacy, and policy debate. Rather than signalling ideological dilution, such engagement reflects processes through which earlier Islamist political commitments are translated and adapted to the normative frameworks of transnational civic environments. The findings show that exile-based activism enables Islamist actors to sustain ideological continuity while reworking their repertoires of engagement within hybrid arenas that target political transformation not only in their countries of origin but also in host countries and transnationally.

Keywords: Islamic activism; political islam; civil society; transnational arenas; contentious politics

Introduction

Since their emergence in the early twentieth century, Islamist movements have pursued projects aimed at reshaping state–society relations, combining contentious mobilization with the construction of social and organizational infrastructures such as welfare networks, mosques, and educational institutions.[1] Over time, sustained repression profoundly altered the conditions under which Islamic activism could be pursued. Bans, imprisonment, surveillance, and forced displacement restricted access to formal politics. A substantial body of literature has examined Islamist movements through the lens of 'moderation', whether as a consequence of political inclusion (Clark, 2006; Schwedler, 2011;

[1] The term "Islamist movements" refer to movements associated with "political Islam," broadly understood as actors who mobilize Islamic references in the articulation of political projects. In this article, Islamism is conceptualised as a specific form of Islamic activism, understood as the broader set of collective practices, mobilisations, and forms of engagement inspired by Islamic values, identities, and references. The use of the term Islamic activism in the title reflects this broader analytical framework, while the empirical focus remains on Islamist actors and movements.

Wickham, 2013) or, conversely, as an adaptive response to exclusion (Cavatorta and Merone, 2013). While this scholarship has generated important insights into patterns of ideological change, it risks obscuring the diversity of trajectories through which Islamic activism unfolds. Under conditions of exclusion, the political project is rarely eliminated; rather, it tends to be displaced and reorganized across alternative arenas of engagement, including associational life, welfare provision, religious institutions, and community-based initiatives.

These issues acquire renewed relevance in the context of "exile".[2] Over the past decades, authoritarian repression in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has generated waves of displacement among activists affiliated to Islamist movements. Diasporic settings are often implicitly framed as spaces of political reopening, where activists can engage more freely within transnational advocacy networks. Existing research on diaspora activism, however, points to a more ambivalent configuration, in which opportunities for political participation coexist with new and uneven forms of securitization (Moss, 2022; Sigillò and Mattoni, 2022).

This article approaches Islamic activism in exile as unfolding under conditions of double constraint.[3] Experiences of repression in countries of origin do not disappear with displacement; rather, they travel with activists, shaping political subjectivities, repertoires, and expectations regarding risks and possibilities. At the same time, diasporic engagement is increasingly structured by the securitization of Islamic activism in host societies. Across Europe and North America, overlapping dynamics of surveillance, suspicion, and regulatory intervention blur the boundaries between civic engagement, political activism, and security threat, even when activism takes peaceful forms.[4] These dynamics do not simply constrain activism; they actively reshape the arenas in which political engagement can unfold.

It is within this context that the article situates Islamic activism in exile. Drawing on multi-sited fieldwork, it examines how activists affiliated with North African Islamist movements—Tunisia's Ennahda, Algeria's Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), and Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood—reconfigure

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2 The notion of exile employed in this article should not be understood as denoting a formal legal status. Rather, it refers to a condition experienced by individuals who, for political, security-related, or other coercive reasons, are unable to return to their countries of origin. The term is therefore used to capture a lived experience of forced displacement and con- strained return, irrespective of legal classification.

3 Data are obtained under the framework of the research project HYBRIS (Hybrid Trajectories of Transnational Islamism). HYBRIS has received funding from the European Union's Horizon Europe Research and Innovation program under the grant agreement n. 101107902. This publication reflexts only the author's view. It does not represent the view of the European Commission and the European Commission is not responsible for any use that may be made of the information it contains.

4 In late 2025 and early 2026, the U.S. government initiated and acted on a process to designate specific national chapters of the Muslim Brotherhood as terrorist organizations under U.S. counterterrorism law. These developments form part of broader securitization dynamics shaping Western policy debates on Islamist actors. Similar concerns have emerged in France, where a 2024 government-commissioned report on the Muslim Brotherhood and associated networks framed Islamist mobilization within civil society as a potential security issue.

forms of political engagement under conditions shaped both by repression in countries of origin and by securitarian governance in host societies.[5] In other words, how do Islamist activists reorganize their political engagement when trajectories shaped by repression in their countries of origin intersect with securitized host environments?

Analytically, the article examines how political engagement is reconfigured in exile through a set of recurring trajectories that unfold across distinct arenas of action. It identifies four such trajectories, each corresponding to a specific configuration of arenas: transnational opposition to authoritarian regimes from abroad; engagement in human rights and social justice advocacy; involvement in humanitarian and charitable action; and participation in knowledge production and policy-oriented activism. These trajectories are not treated as discrete or mutually exclusive paths, but as patterned ways in which activists navigate and combine different arenas under conditions of constraint.

Conceptual framework

Repression and Reconfiguration of Political Action

For Islamist movements, authoritarian constraints have historically reshaped the modalities through which political projects are pursued by redirecting engagement away from formal political institutions toward other domains of collective action. Scholarship on Islamic activism shows that participation in civil society has often provided movements with structured sites through which political projects are sustained when access to formal politics is restricted (Wiktorowicz 2002; Cavatorta 2012; Clark 2004; Hanafi and Nefissa 2020). From this perspective, associational practices do not operate outside politics but constitute alternative modes of political engagement through which Islamist movements reproduce their ideological commitments through other means (Sigillò 2023).

Approaches informed by a Gramscian understanding of civil society as a terrain of struggle for hegemony provide a useful framework for examining how Islamist political projects can be pursued outside formal political institutions (Simms 2002; Butko 2004; Merone 2021). In this view, political engagement under constraint is not defined primarily by open confrontation with the state, but by the ways in which everyday practices contribute to building social influence, legitimacy, and organizational continuity over time.

At the same time, existing scholarship has often emphasized moments of ideological articulation or visible mobilization, while devoting less attention to the incremental and routinized practices embed-

[5] Fieldwork for this study was carried out in contexts marked by varying degrees of constraint, across multiple sites in Europe (Paris, Geneva, and London) and North America (New York, Washington, and Montreal). Given the potential risks associated with public identification, most interviewees requested anonymity.

ded in everyday civic engagement. This focus limits the analysis of contexts characterized by prolonged constraint, where political engagement unfolds through the continuous reworking of relations among actors, practices, and institutional settings. A relational approach makes it possible to examine these processes without assuming either depoliticization or ideological retreat, and without predetermining the spaces through which political engagement is articulated.

Revolutionary Ambitions without Confrontation

To examine these less visible modalities of political engagement, the article draws on Asef Bayat's notions of *"quiet encroachment"* and *"non-movements"* as analytical tools for understanding incremental, informal, and often non-confrontational forms of political action (Bayat 2005; 2010). Developed in the context of Middle Eastern authoritarian settings, Bayat's framework conceptualizes political action as a set of gradual and dispersed practices through which marginalized actors advance transformative claims in contexts where overt mobilization entails high levels of risk. From this perspective, the absence of open contention does not signal demobilization; rather, quiet encroachment highlights how everyday practices can cumulatively reshape norms, authority, and social relations over time.

While Bayat developed these concepts primarily to explain everyday forms of political action within domestic authoritarian contexts, they also offer a useful lens for understanding how activists in exile pursue long-term political projects through dispersed and indirect practices. Applied to Islamic activism, this framework helps capture how aspirations for profound political and social transformation persist as activists recalibrate their repertoires in response to repression and exile.

Here, *revolutionary ambitions* refer not to insurrectionary strategies but to long-term projects aimed at reshaping political authority, social norms, and moral order. Practices such as civic engagement, welfare provision, and community-based initiatives can therefore be understood not as substitutes for political action, but as indirect yet politically consequential forms of mobilization. By building social legitimacy, sustaining activist networks, and embedding alternative moral and political visions in everyday life, these practices allow broader transformative projects to endure while minimizing direct confrontation with the state.

From Civil Society to Transnational Arenas

In much of the Western literature, civil society is interpreted through a governance-oriented, liberal lens, as a bounded sphere of voluntary associations primarily oriented toward service provision, social integration, and the management of social problems rather than contentious political mobilization

(Ferguson 1994; Howell and Pearce 2001). This framing risks obscuring forms of political engagement that unfold outside, across, or in tension with the institutional and normative boundaries of civil society.

Especially under conditions of repression and displacement, political engagement rarely remains confined to a single sphere or scale. Activists often operate across multiple spaces, where civic, humanitarian, professional, and advocacy activities may simultaneously function as politically consequential forms of engagement. An arena-based perspective makes it possible to capture this political dimension more clearly. Rather than treating such practices as apolitical forms of civil society participation, it highlights how they can constitute arenas of strategic interaction in which actors pursue political goals, advance claims, and sometimes engage in indirect or low-intensity forms of contention.

To analyze these dynamics, the article draws on the concept of *arena* (Jasper and Duyvendak 2015; King and Jasper 2022). Arenas are not defined by their institutional status or normative orientation, but by patterned interactions among actors operating under specific constraints and expectations. Unlike civil society as a normative category, the concept of arena does not presuppose a clear boundary between political and non-political action. Instead, it directs attention to how actors position themselves strategically within relational fields of interaction and how political engagement unfolds across multiple arenas.

Reconfiguring Islamic activism in exile: hybrid arenas of contention

This section outlines trajectories of engagement through which Islamist activists rearticulate their activism through new forms of civic participation from abroad. It shows how these individual and collective trajectories unfold within hybrid transnational arenas formed through interaction with non-Islamic actors, issues, and institutions. These arenas are understood as overlapping fields of engagement, ranging from less institutionalized and confrontational mobilization to more institutionalized and moderate forms of participation. Across this spectrum, such trajectories remain politically meaningful practices through which revolutionary imaginaries are sustained, reshaped, and adapted in exile.

Opposition from Abroad: Transnational Protest Arenas

A first arena consists of mobilizations against authoritarian regimes in activists' countries of origin, organized from exile and articulated through protest initiatives and digital campaigns.

This form of mobilization is well illustrated in the literature on long-distance opposition, which shows how exiled activists continue to challenge authoritarian regimes from outside their countries of origin (Magued, 2018; Bonci, 2022; Mattoni and Sigillò, 2022; Serres, 2024; Zederman, 2025). Building on

this scholarship, the article examines how oppositional engagement unfolds within hybrid arenas of contention where Islamist actors interact with non-Islamic dissidents, advocacy networks, and transnational publics. Focusing on these arenas makes it possible to capture how activism directed at radical political change in the country of origin is maintained while being reconfigured through the repertoires and normative frameworks that structure transnational civic spaces.

An exemplary case of this form of mobilization is the movement *Rachad* (Arabic for "integrity" or "rectitude"), founded in 2007 by Algerian dissidents in exile. Emerging largely from the trajectories of former FIS activists who relocated to Europe after the repression of the 1990s, *Rachad* developed as a hybrid oppositional platform bringing together ex-FIS figures and non-Islamist dissidents. While deliberately avoiding explicit Islamist labeling, several of its leading members originate from Islamist political milieus and remain committed to a project of radical political transformation in Algeria. This continuity is visible in how activists frame their political project. While Rachad publicly adopts the language of democratic reform and anti-corruption, several of its leaders explicitly link these claims to earlier Islamist visions of moral governance and social justice. In interviews, activists frequently describe their engagement as a continuation of the political struggle initiated within Islamist movements, now articulated through the vocabulary of democratic accountability and popular sovereignty rather than through explicitly Islamist organizational forms: "Before, our struggle was inside Algeria. Now it continues from abroad. The goal — ending injustice and building a just political order — remains the same".[6]

Rachad's activism relies heavily on digital infrastructures and media production—most notably through *Rachad TV* and online communication platforms—which allow the movement to sustain a visible oppositional presence from abroad. These activities intensified during the 2019 *Hirak* mobilizations, when *Rachad* organized demonstrations across European cities and coordinated digital campaigns in support of the mass anti-regime movement in Algeria. [7]

The interaction between *Rachad* and the *Hirak* illustrates how hybrid arenas of contention emerge across exile and domestic contexts. While the *Hirak* constituted a broad popular mobilization within Algeria, *Rachad*'s activism from abroad intersected with it through diasporic protest networks and transnational media circulation. In this configuration, exile-based opposition and domestic mass mobilization became interconnected arenas through which Islamist political trajectories were rearticulated within broader and ideologically diverse oppositional spaces.

[6] Interview with a member of *Rachad*, Paris, May 2022.

[7] The *Hirak* movement refers to the mass, peaceful protests that began in Algeria in February 2019, initially to oppose President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's bid for a fifth term. The movement quickly evolved into a broader demand for systemic political change and an end to military dominance in governance.

Similar dynamics of exile-based mobilization can be observed in the trajectories of Tunisian Islamist activists. During the authoritarian periods under Habib Bourguiba (1956–1987) and Zine El Abidine Ben Ali (1987–2011), many *Ennahda* members were forced into exile, with France emerging as the primary hub of the Nahdawi diaspora, alongside significant presences in the United Kingdom (Dazey and Zederman, 2017). From these locations, activists sustained oppositional networks that preserved revolutionary narratives centred on dignity, freedom, and social justice, contributing to the incubation of political alternatives that later fed into the 2011 Jasmine Revolution.

Following President Kais Saied's 2021 constitutional coup, exile re-emerged as a central site of Ennahda-affiliated activism, particularly in France and Canada (notably Québec). In this setting, Tunisian Islamist actors have increasingly mobilized within a hybrid oppositional arena, adopting confrontational repertoires and modes of engagement that blur established ideological boundaries —dynamics that echo earlier forms of cross-ideological opposition developed in exile in the 2000s, such as the *October 18 Coalition* initiative (Zederman, 2025).

Their activism encompasses street protests, media interventions on *Zeitouna TV*[8]*,* and advocacy initiatives such as *Tunisians Against the Coup*, as well as political platforms like the *Pacte de la Tunisie pour la Restauration et la Consolidation de la Démocratie*. Signed by a heterogeneous constellation of diaspora actors—including Islamists, leftist activists, journalists, and intellectuals—the *Pacte* exemplifies how exile-based mobilization is embedded in a plural arena of contention structured by cross-ideological coalitions.

Interviews with activists further reveal that mobilization abroad is explicitly framed as a continuation of the revolutionary process initiated in 2011.[9] Hybridization here operates on multiple levels: organizationally, through convergence with leftist groups; and discursively, through the strategic articulation of secular, rights-based language to defend democratic gains, while remaining anchored in Islamic moral imaginaries.

As for the Egyptian Islamist activists, exile-based confrontation has been particularly pronounced since the 2013 military coup, with dense networks of mobilization emerging across France, the United Kingdom, and especially the United States. In France, the *French Collective for the Defense of Democracy in Egypt* (CODE Egypt) was established in 2013 following demonstrations held at the mosque of *La Courneuve*, located at the headquarters of the Union of Islamic Organizations of France (Dazey and Zederman, 2017). Although rooted in Islamist networks, the collective positioned itself as a civil society actor committed to defending democratic principles and human rights, illustrating the hybridization of religious infrastructures with secular protest forms.

[8] An Islamic-oriented TV channel.

[9] Interview with R. Driss, member of Ennahda in France, Paris January 2026.

In the United States, initiatives such as *Egyptians Abroad for Democracy* and the *Mohamed Soltan Freedom Initiative* became central vehicles for sustaining opposition to the Al-Sisi regime from abroad. This transnational activism intersected with ideological recalibration, most notably articulated in the 2016 *Homeland for All document* drafted by a coalition of exiled Egyptian Islamists and revolutionary figures.[10] The text frames exile-based mobilization as a continuation of the "true revolution" of January 25, 2011, reaffirming its foundational slogans—"bread, freedom, human dignity, and social justice"—while grounding democratic claims in Islamic principles such as *ʿadl* (justice) and *shura* (consultation).

Overall, the cases discussed above reveal a common pattern in the trajectories of Islamist activists in exile. Rather than mobilizing exclusively within explicitly Islamist organizations, they engage in broader arenas of regime-change activism that bring together diverse actors, including secular dissidents, advocacy networks, civil society organizations, and policy-oriented platforms. Within these transnational arenas, Islamist activists participate in causes that are not framed primarily in Islamic terms—such as anti-authoritarian protest, human rights advocacy, or democratic reform—thereby contributing to politically plural coalitions directed at political transformation in their countries of origin.

This process produces hybrid arenas of contention in which actors with different ideological backgrounds interact and share repertoires of mobilization. Yet such engagement does not imply ideological abandonment. Instead, Islamist political trajectories persist through processes of translation and recomposition, as activists adapt their language and strategies to the normative expectations of transnational civic spaces while remaining oriented toward longer-term political projects. Approaching these dynamics through an arena-based perspective helps capture how ideological continuity and strategic adaptation coexist within exile-based opposition.

Human Rights and Social Justice Advocacy: Transnational Normative Arenas

A second trajectory of Islamic activism in exile unfolds within transnational normative arenas centered on human rights and social justice advocacy. While social movements' literature has extensively examined transnational solidarity in contemporary activism (Tarrow, 2005; della Porta & Tarrow, 2012), little attention has been paid to how diasporic Islamist actors have navigated this field and with what implications.

[10] Text in Arabic available here.

As in their countries of origin, many Islamist activists articulate their political aspirations through the language of human rights. In diasporic settings, however, this repertoire tends to become more visible and institutionalized, as political engagement unfolds within transnational advocacy spaces in which claims are commonly articulated through the normative framework of human rights, often aligning with what Zederman describes as the "humanitarian means of action" (Zederman, 2025: 81).

This form of engagement should not be understood as a mere strategic adaptation to Western normative environments. Instead, it rests on the translation of Islamic ethical principles—such as justice (*ʿadl*), resistance to oppression (*ẓulm*), and moral responsibility (*masʾūliyya*)—into universally legible claims, enabling activists to remain politically active while navigating the constraints of international legitimacy,

The Swiss-based association *Al-Karama* ("Dignity") provides a particularly clear illustration of this dynamic. Founded by Mourad Dhina—a former leader of the FIS and a founding figure of the Rachad movement—*Al-Karama* operates as a formally non-partisan organization embedded within international human rights mechanisms. Yet its engagement is deeply shaped by Islamic moral commitments that inform both its political vision and its understanding of justice. Principles such as justice (*ʿadl*), dignity (*karāma*) and the opposition to oppression (*ẓulm*) constitute the ethical grammar through which authoritarian violence is interpreted and contested. These principles sustain a revolutionary horizon oriented toward dismantling structures of domination rather than merely documenting abuses. As one activist explained, "Our aim is revolutionary: to create a more just global system without oppression and violence, in our country and at transnational level."[11]

Rather than engaging in direct political confrontation, *Al-Karama* channels this horizon through the infrastructure of global human rights, documenting torture, arbitrary detention, and enforced disappearances across Algeria and the wider MENA region. By engaging UN special procedures, treaty bodies, and European institutions, Islamist activists translate oppositional claims into the normative language of international law. This process does not erase their Islamic political heritage; it embeds it within a transnational arena where Islamic moral commitments are articulated through non-Islamic institutional forms. *Al-Karama* thus exemplifies a hybrid mode of contention in which Islamic ethics and universalist human rights discourses mutually reinforce one another.

Similar processes are visible among Tunisian Islamist activists in exile. Associations such as *UNI'T,* established in Paris by Ennahda-affiliated activists after the 2011 revolution, initially focused on supporting Tunisia's democratic transition (Dazey & Zederman 2017). Over time, their agenda expanded

[11] Online interview with a member of the association who requested anonymity, December 2024.

to include struggles against Islamophobia, racism, and socio-economic exclusion in the French context. Through partnerships with secular and leftist organizations, *UNI'T* embedded Tunisian political concerns within the normative frameworks of French civil society. This shift entailed a hybridization of repertoires: while activists reframed their engagement through social justice and anti-discrimination idioms, their political imagination remained anchored in the unfulfilled aspirations of the 2011 revolution, which continued to structure their understanding of justice, dignity, and political responsibility.[12]

The *Tunisian United Network* (TUN), founded in the United States by exiled Ennahda affiliate Mongi Dhaouadi, further illustrates this de-territorialized reconfiguration. TUN channels diaspora mobilization into a transnational civil society initiative that denounces authoritarianism in Tunisia while engaging in broader emancipatory struggles. Its advocacy work aligns Islamic moral values with universalist principles of accountability and democracy, sustaining a transformative vision without relying on explicitly Islamist frames. Revolutionary objectives are thus preserved through translation rather than confrontation, and through participation in normative arenas rather than party politics.[13]

Beyond Tunisia-focused initiatives, Islamist activists increasingly participate in broader transnational advocacy infrastructures such as *Democracy for the Arab World Now* (DAWN) and Muslim civil rights organizations like CAIR, situating national struggles within global discourses on authoritarianism and civil liberties. Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood activists have adopted similar strategies since 2013, contributing to advocacy organizations that submit reports to UN bodies, engage in international litigation, and cooperate with global NGOs. These practices reflect not ideological dilution but a displacement of revolutionary opposition into institutionalized arenas, where Islamic moral commitments continue to inform political engagement.

This trajectory also extends beyond formal organizational settings into issue-based mobilizations around Gaza, police violence, and racial injustice across Europe and North America. In the United States, *Within Our Lifetime* offers a salient empirical illustration of hybrid coalition-based activism involving Islamist actors, as described by interviewees. Activists affiliated with WOL consistently report participation in coalitional spaces that bring together Palestinian and Muslim organizers, Islamic civil society groups, and secular progressive organizations, particularly through platforms such as *NY4Palestine*, which coordinates a wide range of grassroots actors. Interviewees emphasize that these coalitions are sustained through the articulation of claims centred on human dignity, anti-racism, and global justice, which they describe as essential for situating the Palestinian struggle within

[12] Interview with a member of the association who requested anonymity.
[13] https://tunisianunitednetwork.org/

broader transnational conversations on white supremacy, U.S. imperialism, and racialized global hierarchies. At the same time, respondents stress that their engagement in such coalitions does not entail the dilution of religious references; rather, they point to the continued use of Islamic moral and political vocabularies—visible in chants, slogans, and public-facing repertoires invoking Islamic ethics of justice and liberation—as a key resource for mobilization.[14] According to interviewees, this combination enables activists to remain rooted in Islamic normative frameworks while rendering their claims politically legible and resonant within heterogeneous progressive coalitional arenas.

Humanitarian and Charitable Engagement: Transnational Arenas of Care

Under conditions of authoritarian repression in their countries of origin, Islamist diasporas from Egypt, Algeria, and Tunisia have developed multifaceted infrastructures of engagement across Europe and North America that problematize rigid distinctions between political and apolitical spheres. Rather than signalling disengagement or depoliticization, these practices reflect a strategic reconfiguration of activism in exile. Transnational aid initiatives—often articulated through humanitarian idioms—constitute a key site of this reconfiguration. While not reducible to overt political mobilization, such initiatives are normatively grounded in the Islamic principle of *commanding good and forbidding wrong*, which provides an ethical framework for sustained social intervention and, indirectly, political positioning (Meijer, 2014).

Building on existing scholarship on Islamic humanitarianism (Faure, 2022; Misraoui, 2015; Petersen, 2015; Pall, 2015), this article identifies two forms of humanitarian engagement through which diasporic activists with Islamist backgrounds remain publicly active.

The first form consists of grassroots charitable associations embedded within specific diasporic communities, often founded by activists formerly affiliated with Islamist movements. Operating primarily at the grassroots level, these organizations focus on everyday practices of care, including food distribution, language instruction, and social support for precarious and marginalized populations in host societies—frequently within the same diasporic milieu. While activists' motivations are informed by Islamic ethical references, such as responsibility toward the vulnerable or moral accountability for social injustice, these organizations are not publicly framed as religious. As one activist explained, "Here in France, if you are Tunisian and create a religious association, you are immediately targeted as a terrorist."[15]

[14]Participant observation of street protests in New York City, from September 2024 to June 2025.
[15] Interview with an activist of a charitable association in Saint-Denis (Paris), December 2025.

Humanitarian engagement is instead articulated as community-based action oriented toward social solidarity and inclusion, in ways that adapt to the normative registers of host societies. Such adaptation, however, does not imply a depoliticization of action. Rather, for many activists interviewed, religious and political commitments intersect through a shared moral framework that defines social responsibility as a collective obligation. As one interviewee explained, "serving the poor is part of our collective responsibility as Muslims to command what is right and oppose what is wrong. For us, this is not only charity but also a way of responding to injustice and working toward change in society.".[16]

The second form unfolds through the participation of diasporic activists in established transnational humanitarian networks that are not Islamic in character. Despite recurrent political and media claims about Islamist "entryism" into Western civil society, there is little evidence of prominent Islamist figures holding formal leadership roles within major non-Muslim humanitarian NGOs. Existing research instead shows that engagement takes place through shared humanitarian infrastructures, norms, and professional practices. Muslim-founded organizations such as *Islamic Relief* operate within the same humanitarian ecosystem as secular NGOs, engaging with coordination platforms, accountability frameworks, and discussions on universal humanitarian principles (Benthall, 2015; Petersen, 2018). At the same time, mainstream humanitarian institutions have developed sustained dialogues with Islamic organizations to reflect on ethical frameworks and humanitarian norms, as documented in post-2014 initiatives supported by the *International Committee of the Red Cross* (Mohamed and Ofteringer, 2015; Salek, 2015). In this second form, activists' involvement does not transform these arenas into Islamic spaces but reflects the incorporation of diverse ethical backgrounds into broadly shared humanitarian practices.

Taken together, these forms of humanitarian engagement illustrate how exile-based activism unfolds within hybrid arenas where civic participation and political commitments intersect. Although these initiatives are articulated through humanitarian and community-oriented practices, they remain embedded in broader trajectories of political engagement shaped by earlier Islamist mobilization. Approaching these spaces as arenas helps capture how activism is reconfigured rather than depoliticized under conditions of repression and displacement. In such contexts, humanitarian action becomes one of the sites through which activists maintain public engagement, translate ethical commitments into socially legitimate practices, and sustain longer-term political orientations within the normative frameworks that structure transnational civil society.

[16] Interview with an activist of a charitable association in Montreal, November 2025.

Knowledge Production and Policy Engagement: Transnational Epistemic Arenas

A fourth trajectory of Islamist activism in diasporic settings can be observed in epistemic and policy-oriented arenas, where engagement takes the form of knowledge production, professional training, and participation in governance-related debates. These arenas are structured by technocratic norms, academic conventions, and policy-oriented expectations that privilege expertise and institutional legitimacy. Although such spaces are often perceived externally as apolitical, some activists appear to understand their involvement as connected to broader political projects.

For activists affiliated with Islamist movements, engagement in these arenas may represent a form of indirect or low-visibility political action. Drawing—often implicitly—on intellectual traditions associated with Islamic thought, including the valorization of knowledge (*'ilm*) and consultation (*shura*), such forms of participation may be read as attempts to engage with dominant transnational discourses and to accrue legitimacy within institutional arenas.

Empirically, this trajectory is reflected in the creation of research centers, think tanks, and professional networks operating mostly in the UK and in the United States and embedded in diasporic environments mostly shaped by experiences of political exile.

The *Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy* (CSID) represents a prominent example falling under this trajectory. Founded in Washington, DC, in 1999 by Radwan Masmoudi, a former Ennahda popular member, during a period of intense repression in Tunisia, CSID has focused on research and dialogue concerning Islam, democracy, and governance. Through conferences, leadership training programs, and collaborations with academic institutions such as Georgetown University, the center has facilitated sustained interaction between Tunisian diasporic actors, Arab intellectuals, Western scholarly and policy networks such as the Brookings Institution and the Carnegie Endowment.

Within these arenas, Islamic references are typically articulated through conceptual frameworks compatible with governance-oriented discourse. Rather than advancing overtly partisan claims, organizations such as CSID emphasize research, dialogue, and leadership training. Yet these activities are not politically neutral. By producing knowledge, shaping policy debates, and cultivating transnational networks of expertise, such initiatives intervene in discussions about democracy, governance, and the role of Islamic actors in political life.

In this sense, epistemic engagement constitutes a form of political action that operates through expertise rather than direct mobilization. Through conferences, publications, and policy dialogues, actors associated with Islamist trajectories participate in the production of normative frameworks that influence how Islam, democracy, and political reform are debated in international arenas. These activities

illustrate how activism can be reconfigured within technocratic and academic spaces that appear institutionally neutral but nonetheless function as arenas of political contestation.

A similar trajectory can be observed in the case of Sami Hamdi, a former member of Ennahda who, in the diasporic context, has repositioned his political engagement within policy and knowledge-oriented arenas in the UK.[17] As the founder of the *International Interest* think tank, Hamdi operates within epistemic spaces structured by geopolitical analysis and political economy, producing expertise on the Middle East and North Africa for policy and media audiences. While informed by prior involvement in an Islamist movement, his interventions are articulated primarily through the language of international relations rather than movement-based or ideological discourse. Islamic references are neither foregrounded nor entirely absent but selectively translated into governance- and strategy-oriented analytical frames. This trajectory further illustrates how Islamist-linked actors in exile may reconfigure political engagement through knowledge production, anticipating similar patterns observed among Algerian diasporic initiatives.

Comparable dynamics can be observed among Algerian Islamist players in exile. Anwar Haddam, a former senior leader of the FIS, established the *Al-Taraqi Center for Strategic Studies* in Washington as a platform dedicated to the study of democratic transitions, governance, and human rights in the Maghreb. Drawing on Haddam's background as both a political actor and an Islamist intellectual, the center's work reflects an effort to situate Islamic political thought within analytical frameworks centered on pluralism, institutional reform, and constitutional governance. Here, religious references are neither foregrounded nor excluded but selectively incorporated into policy- and research-oriented discussions.

The above-mentioned cases suggest that epistemic and policy-oriented arenas constitute sites where political engagement is reconfigured rather than abandoned. Political meaning emerges less through overt claims or mobilization than through sustained participation in institutions devoted to research, expertise, and governance debates. The significance of these practices lies in how diasporic actors, shaped by experiences of exile, operate within arenas that appear depoliticized, while remaining connected—often implicitly—to broader concerns with political and social transformation.

Conclusion

[17] In October 2025, Hamdi was detained by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) upon arrival in the United States, and his visa was subsequently revoked.

The findings of this article suggest that exile should not be understood primarily as a condition of political marginalization. Rather, it can generate new configurations of activism by opening access to arenas that differ from those available in the country of origin. In these settings, political engagement is not simply displaced but redistributed across multiple settings. What appears as civic engagement in transnational civil society can therefore constitute an alternative mode of political action through which activists continue to pursue longer-term political projects.

More broadly, the analysis highlights how ideological continuity can persist even as the forms of activism change. The case of Islamist actors in exile shows that engagement in humanitarian work, human rights advocacy, or expert and policy-oriented spaces does not necessarily signal ideological moderation or retreat. Instead, these arenas enable activists to translate and adapt their political commitments to new institutional and normative environments. This process involves a reworking of repertoires rather than a rupture with earlier projects.

These dynamics are not unique to Islamist activism. They point more generally to how political actors operating under repression or displacement can sustain political engagement through civic practices that unfold across different scales and institutional contexts. Approaching these spaces as arenas helps capture this movement between domains and makes visible the political dimensions of practices often interpreted as non-contentious. In this sense, examining activism in exile contributes to a broader understanding of how political projects endure, adapt, and circulate across transnational settings when direct participation in domestic politics becomes constrained.

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