Islamism and the rise of Islamic charities in postrevolutionary Tunisia: claiming political Islam through other means?

Islamism and the rise of charitable associations in post-revolutionary Tunisia:

claiming Political Islam through other means?

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Abstract

This article contributes to the debate on the transformation of Islamic activism in a context of political change. Drawing on the case of post-authoritarian Tunisia, it reconstructs and explains the trajectories of Islamists' participation in civil society during a period of renewed opportunities and intense political conflict. At the crossroads between the literature on Islamic politics and social movement studies, the study discusses how the Islamist actors' engagement with the associational sphere affects their ideological positions and mobilization capacities. Notably, the article shows how activists engaged in charitable associations have, over time, recast their relations with the party Ennahda, the public authorities, and international donors, in order to cope with external pressures arising from a polarized political landscape. Contrary to what could be expected, the change of focus from the political to the associative sphere does not amount to a process of de-ideologization but is rather to be understood as a coping strategy whereby Islamic activists continue to mobilize in conditions where they have some room for manoeuvre whilst Political Islam is difficult to pursue at the party level.

Introduction

This article presents a novel theoretical argument on the transformation of Islamic activism.[1] Contrary to those who believe that the agenda of Islamist parties is unmalleable to regimes' political change, analysts of Political Islam have emphasized the capacity of transformation of such organizations. Notably, some scholars believe that political parties with an Islamic agenda abandon their 'revolutionary' ideology to cope with the modern political system.[2] Another view believes that Islamic actors naturally transform their ideologies based on their experience with secularists and non-Islamists, the so-called moderation hypothesis.[3] This paper lends support to the idea that Islamic activism is susceptible to adaptation but that its transformative dynamics do not necessarily lead to the transformation of activists' ideology: to a prosecution of their political projects through other means which are compatible with a democratic system. In doing so, this paper documents the Tunisian experience, by emphasizing the importance of looking at extra-party spheres of Islamic engagement, such as civil society.

The Tunisian case is relevant insofar as the Islamist movement has, over time, undertaken significant changes in order to survive in a constrained political environment. Unlike in other countries of the Arab world, Islamic activism has been characterized by a faltered development. Since its origins in the 1970s, a broad strata of state and society have heavily opposed the Islamist movement, with this opposition leading, periodically, to repressive measures under the regimes of

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[1] Quintan Wiktorowicz, *Islamic activism: A social movement theory approach* (Indiana University Press, 2004). According to the definition given by Wiktorowiz, the term 'Islamic activism' refers to Islamic activists' socio-political mobilization. In this paper the terms 'Islamic activists' and 'Islamists' are used as synonomis.

[2] Olivier Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam*. London: I. B. Tauris, 1994. Roy, R. The Failure of Political Islam. London: I. B. Tauris, 1994; Asef Bayat, 'The coming of a post Islamist Society', *Critique: Journal for Critical Studies of the Middle East* 5, no. 9 (1996),

[3] Jillian Schwedler, 'Democratization, inclusion and the moderation of Islamist parties', *Development* 50, no. 1 (2007): 56-61.

Bourguiba (1956-1987) and Ben Ali (1987-2011). Such a hostile context has pushed the party to progressively revise its political agenda.[4]

The collapse of Ben Ali's regime allowed Islamic activists to take the stage after decades of repression. The greatest challenge for the Islamist party Ennahda, after its victory at the first free elections in October 2011, was to clear up the widespread suspicion about its commitment to democracy, by accelerating its transformation from an Islamist to a conservative party.[5]

This article shifts the focus from the political party to the associative sphere, by analyzing the case study of Islamist activists engaged in charitable associations. In doing so, this study methodologically and theoretically challenges a one-dimensional understanding of Islamic activism which relies on political parties as the sole units of analysis. Thus, it shows how religiously oriented associations can also play a role as agents of Islamic activism beyond party politics, by adapting themselves to a neoliberal democracy. The analysis highlights how activists who are engaged in civil society perceive incentives and constraints differently than in the political party and, as such, formulate different strategies of mobilization.

The article focuses on charitable associations as a relevant case study to illustrate the capacity of adaptation of Islamist actors outside the political party. Contrary to other religiously oriented associations, charities trace their origins almost entirely from the Islamist movement.[6] However, religious charities appeared in Tunisia only after the fall of the authoritarian regime, during a democratization process characterized by fraught political conflict, and when the national legitimacy of civil society organizations rested in their independence from the political sphere. In order to survive

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[4] Merone Fabio, Sigillò Ester and Damiano De Facci, 'Nahda And Tunisian Islamic Activism', in Akbarzadeh S. and Conduit Dara (Eds.), *New Opposition In The Middle East* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

[5] Francesco Cavatorta and Fabio Merone, 'Moderation through exclusion? The journey of the Tunisian Ennahda from fundamentalist to conservative party,' *Democratization* 20, no. 5 (2013): 857–875.

[6] As shown in the article, the political party and charitable associations are linked by the same political origins, yet they developed in different times and in different ways.

in a renewed political environment, these associations have recently undertaken a process of transformation to meet state and international donors' requirements of autonomy and professionalization. The willingness to distance themselves from the political sphere and comply with new rules and norms beyond their religious commitments was also due to the restoration of state control after the political assassinations of two left-wing activists in 2013. Terrorist attacks in Tunis and Sousse in March and July 2015 and the attacks by militants of Islamic State in the southern city of Ben Guerdane at the border with Libya in March 2016, have opened up a new era of securitization of the Tunisian Islamic landscape (partially supported by the so-called 'modernist' forces) which has been given widespread coverage in the media. Islamic charities have been among the most targeted actors, accused of receiving illicit funding from the Gulf countries to finance terrorist activities.

Drawing on a social movement *strategic-relational approach*, this article describes how charities developed in Tunisia after 2011 mobilize as autonomous *players* in multiple *arenas* of mobilization.[7] More specifically, the article shows how Islamic activists have conformed their charitable associations to a neoliberal paradigm of civil society promoted by international donors and local authorities, while at the same time they continue to mobilize in defence of Islamic political principles neglected by Ennahda party after its recent ideological turn. As demonstrated, these *strategies* are not at odds with each other, and their combination eventually resulted in hybrid trajectories of Islamic activism.

The article is structured as follows: First, it gives context to where the Tunisian Islamist movement drew its origins. Second, it sketches a theoretical framework for interpreting the evolution of Islamic activism—with Islamic associations as the point of entry. Third, it scrutinizes the trajectories of Islamic activists engaged in charitable associations and their relational dynamics with the party Ennahda from the fall of the authoritarian regime 2011 until the last elections of 2019.

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[7] Jan W. Duyvendak and James M. Jasper, *Players and arenas: The interactive dynamics of protest* (Amsterdam University Press, 2015).

Fourth, it discusses how activists' engagement in a securitized civil society sector impacts their political positioning (including their stand vis-à-vis the Ennahda's political agenda), and their mobilization capacities. Data collection for the article relies on ethnography combining different methodological tools.[8]

Islamism, post-Islamism and social movement theory: bringing activists' agency back

According to the definition given by Olivier Roy, 'Islamists' are activist groups who see Islam as much a political ideology as a religion.[9] Thus, Islamism (or Political Islam) can refer to diverse forms of social and political activism advocating that public and political life should be guided by Islamic principles or more specifically to movements that call for full implementation of *sharia* (Islamic order or law). Most studies have focused on political parties as the main actors of Political Islam. Conversely, this study shows how other actors, such as religiously oriented associations, can play a pivotal role as agents of Islamic activism outside the political party. In particular, the study shows that the growth of Islamic charitable associations and the dynamics of their mobilization can represent a strategy of adaptation to pursue Political Islam by other means, in contexts where a traditional 'political' expression is difficult to attain.

In order to fully understand the relevance of including the associative sector in the analysis of the evolution of Political Islam in Tunisia, it appears necessary to sketch the dynamics of transformation of the Islamist movement from its origins. Political Islam developed in the 1970s, in

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[8] Field visits occurred in the governorate of Grand Tunis, Siliana, Sfax and Médenine, from November 2015 to October 2019. Ethnography relied on semi-structured interviews to former or current Islamist actors, participant observation of associations' activities, document analysis of original material produced by the party and associations, and social media analysis. Part of the semi-structured interviews conducted in Sfax and Tunis have been conducted with my colleague Damiano De Facci. For sake of protecting informants by keeping their anonymity, names of associations and of their members were changed or not explicitly mentioned in the text.

[9] Olivier Roy, *L'Echec de l'Islam Politique* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1992).

the form of an Islamic community (*jama'a al-Islamyya*).[10] The Islamic group initially focused on preaching activities and in 1981 evolved into a political organization, called the 'Movement of Islamic Tendency' (MIT), drawing its ideological inspiration from the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhoods (MB). The latter conceiving religion and politics as two parts of a whole (*shumuliyya*).[11] Thus, Islam was originally considered to be a global and comprehensive practice, which does not differentiate religious activity from political activity.

The all-embracing Islamist ideology has, over time, undergone a process of transformation. In 1989, the new president Ben Ali, who initially seemed in favour of a policy of inclusion, allowed the Islamist Movement to organize itself in a political party. In order to comply with the Tunisian law banning religious parties, Rachid Ghannouchi, the party founder, decided to change the name of the organization from Movement of Islamic Tendency (*Harakat al-itijah al-islami*) into Movement Ennahda (*Harakat al-Nahda)*—meaning the 'rebirth'—abandoning any Islamic reference which could have aroused suspicions about a potential hidden Islamic agenda.

The Party's ideological transformation continued to be the key-concept of Ennahda's public discourse in a contentious democratization process. Notably, the idea of specialization between the two spheres of engagement, which evolved under the pressure of anti-Islamic political forces,[12] culminated at the tenth party congress held in May 2016, with the decision to officially

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[10] Anne Wolf, *Political Islam in Tunisia: The History of Ennahda*, (Oxford University Press, 2017).

[11] Rory McCarthy, 'When Islamists Lose: the politicization of Tunisia's Ennahda Movement', *The Middle East Journal* 72, no.3 (2018): 365-384.

[12] According to some militants interviewed, the party's leeway was reduced by the presence of the remnants of the old regime still in place, such as the police, high offices of state, and national secret services. Moreover, in 2012, against a background of increasing polarization, part of the old regime's allies gathered the so-called the 'modernist' forces into a new party, *Nidaa Tounes,* 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. See also: Kasper L. Netterstrøm, 'After the Arab Spring. The Islamists' Compromise in Tunisia', *Journal of Democracy* 26, no. 4 (2015): 110–124.

separate preaching activities (*da'wa*) from politics (*siasa*). The so-called *specialization* (*tah as us*) envisaged a distinction between two dimensions intertwined within the same political group: the 'party' dimension (*hizb*) and the 'movement' dimension (*haraka*).[13] In the aftermath of the Congress, Rachid Ghannouchi declared in an interview published in *Le Monde*: 'there is no longer any justification for Political Islam in Tunisia'.[14] Similarly, in another interview published in *Foreign Affairs*, he stated: 'Ennahda has moved beyond its origins as an Islamist party and has fully embraced a new identity as a party of "Muslim democrats". The organization, which I co-founded in the 1980s, is no longer both a political party and a social movement. It has ended all of its cultural and religious activities and now focuses only on politics'.[15] The main consequence of this distinction between the two spheres of engagement was a separation of the careers of party members with the paths of so-called *da'wa* activists engaged in civil society.[16] Thus, several preachers left the *majlis al-choura* (the party's general council) to devote themselves to religious associations. However, the issue of how to deal with religion as opposed to political activities was highly controversial among Islamic activists (both in the party and in the associations). The study of extra-party Islamic activism is therefore important for understanding the transformations of Political Islam in post-revolutionary Tunisia.

The party's transformation pushed many scholars to focus on the reasons for—and implications of—this ideological change. In this literature, there are two ways of looking at the ideological change of Islamist movements. Olivier Roy conceptualized this process of ideological

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[13] Mohamed-Chérif Ferjani, 'La société civile dans le discours politique Tunisien, avant et après la Révolution', *Développement Durable, Citoyenneté et Société Civile*, no. 53 (2014).

[14] See: 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

[15] Rachid Ghannouchi, 'From political Islam to Muslim democracy: The Ennahda party and the future of Tunisia', *Foreign Affairs*, no. 95 (2016).

[16] Alia Gana and Ester Sigillò, 'Les mobilisations contre le rapport sur les libertés individuelles et l'égalité (COLIBE): Vers une spécialisation du parti Ennahda dans l'action partisane?', *L'Année du Maghreb*, no. 21 (2019): 377-383.

transformation as the 'failure of Political Islam', through the category of *post-Islamism*.[17] Thus, according to this perspective, Islamism, as a 'revolutionary' process of societal and political transformation, had failed.[18] According to Roy, this impasse comes either from the aporias of the Islamist's political, societal and ideological project, at the point of being converted into a government program because of state repression; or from the crackdown of the political field that led Islamic actors to reformulate their original project.[19]

 The second way to look at Islamist party transformations, which is not in contradiction with post-Islamism, places more emphasis on the concept of 'moderation'. For authors like Schwedler (2007), the main factor in this evolution is the transformation of the Islamist party in a context of political openness. In this view, particularly in the context of socio-political inclusion, the Islamists would consider a policy of institutional integration and ideological moderation.[20] In light of this, the Tunisian case is emblematic, as the fall of the authoritarian regime and the participation of the Islamist party in the 'political game' of the democratization process, seem to have most strongly influenced the pragmatic turn of the party's leadership.

 Several scholars applied these two categories to the transformation of Ennahda's party after 2011.[21] In particular, previous studies have reasoned with the party's ideological change mainly by way of two opposing interpretations. The first with scholars highlighting the party's pathway to

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[17] Olivier Roy, 'Le Post-Islamisme', *Revue Des Mondes Musulmans Et De La Méditerranée* 85, no. 1 (1999): 11–30. Bayat was the first to coin this term in the early 1990s to describe the failure of Islamism in Iran. Asef Bayat, 'The Coming Of A Post- Islamist Society', *Critique: Journal For Critical Studies Of The Middle East* 5, no.9 (1996): 43–52.

[18] Roy, *L'echec De L'islam Politique.*

[19] Roy, 'Le Post-Islamisme': 11.

[20] Schwedler, 'Democratization, inclusion and the moderation of Islamist parties'.

[21] Francesco Cavatorta and Fabio Merone, 'Moderation through exclusion? The journey of the Tunisian Ennahda from fundamentalist to conservative party'; Francesco Cavatorta and Fabio Merone, 'Post-Islamism, ideological evolution and 'la tunisianité'of the Tunisian Islamist party al-Nahda'. *Journal of Political Ideologies* 20, no. 1 (2015): 27-42.

secularization; the second draws attention to the party's ambiguity, claiming that the party is following a political strategy of 'rebranding' its discourse while hiding its real agenda. The study of Islamist activist positionality in other spheres of Islamic engagement allows for the observation of a more complex picture, by identifying hybrid avenues of Islamic activism.

The theoretical frameworks of 'moderation through inclusion' and 'post-Islamism' overlap insofar as both literatures study the adaptation of Islamists to the new (post-revolutionary) structural conditions, i.e. authoritarian openings (Jordan, Algeria and Tunisia in 1989, Egypt 1984, Maroc 1997), regime change (Tunisia and Egypt in 2011) or regime reform (Morocco and Jordan in 2011). Moreover, these two analytical approaches highlight the dynamics that underpin changes in Islamist ideology within the political party, but they do little to conceptualize other spaces of Islamic activism. For instance, while party cadres, in a period of democratic transition, may strategically lead the party to a process of 'moderation', other dynamics may occur within other spheres of Islamic engagement outside the realm of party politics. For instance, despite its failure as a political project, Roy posits that Islamism remains a factor of social mobilization.[22] Hence the need to explore Islamist activists participation in the civil society sphere as an alternative venue of Islamic activism.

Drawing inspiration from academic works on Islamic activism based on social movement studies,[23] this article scrutinizes the trajectories of religiously oriented charities by applying a 'strategic relational approach'.[24] Relational approaches developed in social movement studies have overcome deterministic analyses based on the interpretation of political opportunities as exogenous

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[22] Roy, 'Le Post-Islamisme'.

[23] The author drew inspirations to develop the theoretical framework from two main remarkable works on Islamic activism based on a social movement approach: Quintan Wiktorowicz, "Islamic activism: A social movement theory approach"; Janine A. Clark, *Islam, charity, and activism: Middle-class networks and social welfare in Egypt, Jordan, and Yemen* (Indiana University Press, 2004).

[24] James M. Jasper, 'A Strategic Approach To Collective Action: Looking For Agency In Social-Movement Choices', *Mobilization: An International Quarterly* 9, no. 1, (2004): 1-16.

structure, by putting forward hypotheses on the dilemmas of social actors which are embedded in complex relationships. Taking a relational approach implies the analysis of *fields of interactions*, or *arenas of mobilizations* and moves away from overtly structural explanations of social mobilization. This approach requires a more in-depth analysis of actors' interactive dynamics—by making sense of what they interpret as political opportunities at specific moments in time.

Social movements (religious or not), therefore, are not passively awaiting opportunities to open up, but instead actively creating them with their action.[25] As such, religiously oriented charities led by Islamic activists act as *players*. According to Jasper: 'we must recognize the full panoply of goals, meanings, and feelings players have, rather than reducing them to a mathematically tractable minimum'.[26] The strategic-relational approach moves away from overtly structural explanations of social mobilization and, in doing so, takes a step back from the more rational-choice approaches of protest behaviours, by stressing the causal input of perceptions in the processes of mobilization.[27] Consequently, collective action demands a more subjectivist and inter-relational perspective that cannot fit into a strict rational choice model. It requires a more in-depth analysis of the actor's interactive dynamics to make sense of what they interpret or perceive as threats and political opportunities.

In recent works on the MENA region, some authors adopted an interactionist perspective.[28] However, these contributions have centred mainly on protest events and, in general, cast their analysis from a perspective of contentious politics. In more general terms, previous literature has focused on

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[25] Donatella della Porta, *Mobilizing for democracy: Comparing 1989 and 2011* (OUP Oxford, 2014).

[26] James M. Jasper, 'A Strategic Approach To Collective Action': 4.

[27] Jeff Goodwin, James M. Jasper and Francesca Polletta, 'Emotional dimensions of social movements'. *The Blackwell companion to social movements* (2004): 413-432.

[28] Frédéric Volpi and James M. Jasper, *Microfoundations of the Arab uprisings* (Amsterdam University Press, 2017).

Islamic movements as monolithic challengers, struggling against other political forces. This article goes beyond the perspective of contentious politics and the one-dimensional understanding of the Tunisian Islamic ecosystem, which is not heterogeneous. Findings presented below demonstrate the utility of conceptualizing activists engaged in religious associations as autonomous agents (or *players*) confronting dilemmas, making choices, reacting to others, in *multiple arenas* where the Ennahda party is also one of the players. As shown in the analysis, activists engaged in the civil society sphere can interact with the party according to multiple logics —thus, their trajectories may diverge from those of the party's members.

The rise of Islamic charities after 2011 between new opportunities and constraints

The collapse of the authoritarian regime in 2011 allowed Islamic activists to take the stage after decades of repression, with the opening up of socio-political opportunities facilitating new forms of socio-political engagement. On January 17, 2011, on the occasion of the presentation of the new government, the Prime Minister Mohamed Ghannouchi announced that the freezing of the activities of associations previously targeted by the regime was over. Therefore, Islamic activists engaged for the first time in the associative field, in a public sphere that, until 2011, was mostly dominated by those associations loyal to Ben Ali's family and its allies.[29] Thanks to the new Decree Law 88 of September 2011, which largely facilitated the administrative procedures for the creation of associations, Tunisia witnessed a boom of religiously oriented associations.[30]

Since 2011 charitable associations have become a new form of activism of Islamic inspiration. The rampant success of Islamic charities after 2011 was due to the increasing demands for socio-political freedom and socio-economic dignity. These issues were taken up by the associative field

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[29] Author's interview with the responsible for the relations with associations at the Ministry in charge of relations with constitutional bodies, civil society and human rights, 18 July 2018.

[30] 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

that tried to set up new ways of advocating social development far from the clientelist network of the old regime. Beside the Revolutionary momentum, the boom of charitable associations doubled with the start of the Libyan crisis in March 2011: thousands of refugees arrived in Tunisia, refugee camps were set up in the South, particularly in the region of Médenine at the border with Libya. Humanitarian aid was organized and structured through the collection of essential products for refugees, caravans of solidarity and volunteering. Charitable associations were born under these circumstances: the massive influx of refugees at the Ras Jadir border led to the development of informal networks, which provided humanitarian assistance before and after the arrival of international aid. In the context of widespread revolutionary enthusiasm, this initial interaction among local informal movements undertaking social welfare activities triggered a process of formalization of charities throughout the country.

Contrary to other religious associations, charities were mostly founded by politically engaged Islamic activists (Islamists), mainly belonging to the MIT, and later to the Ennahda's party. Although other religious actors have carried out charitable activities—such as Salafi associations—only those associations led by former or current Islamist actors are labeled as 'charitable associations' (*al-jam'iyat al-khayriyya)*, with *charity* being conceived as the main scope of associative activities. This is mainly due to the Muslim Brotherhood's (MB) ideological foundations and also to the specific Tunisian political context. First, since the early thirties, social and charitable activities have been an integral part of the action of the MB's idea of society. In fact, the specific ideological apparatus of the Movement is based on the idea that in an Islamic system, the economic activity cannot be separated from moral values, because human life is composed by a spiritual and material unity. In this perspective the origin of social and economic problems is to be attributed to the materialism of western capitalist systems, leading to the moral and cultural alienation of society. The 'Islamic Way', proposing a spiritual and material reconstruction of society, therefore arises as an alternative to

Western systems and offers the solution to all social problems, poverty and unemployment.[31] Secondly, Ennahda's activists clear decision to taking care of charitable activities after 2011 has a clear political connotation, as it represents a sort of redemption of the old regime's opponents, who are now in power and that try to build an alternative welfare system against the old patronage system. In this way, contrary to their local secular counterparts, religious charities emerged not referring to social policies, but to religion, and in opposition to the Islam of the state and the mechanism of patronage of social assistance during the old regime: 'We do not do it for interest, we do not do it for the poor; for us it is an obligation, it is our religion, we do it for God'.[32] Reference to Islam by most of the charitable organizations post 2011 is also evident in funding procedures: charities mostly finance their activities through the collection of locally collected alms (*zakat*), which entails the giving of a percentage of an individual's wealth to the poor (one of the five pillars of Islam and as such is an obligation); and from donations (*sadaqat*) which are a personal form of charity also encouraged by Islam, but these do not represent an obligation. Until 2013 Tunisia charities have been mostly funded from the Gulf monarchies' charitable foundations. The most active throughout the country are a Qatar Charity and two other powerful Kuwaiti organizations: the Sheikh Abdullah al-Nouri Charitable Society and the International Islamic Charity Organization. During the initial period after the Revolution, the presence of Arab donors proved to be particularly beneficial for Islamic charities that were struggling to attract international funding through the lack of experience, in contrast to those associations that were founded before the 2011.

In organizing their activities, charitable associations have established among themselves a careful division of labour, which aims at ensuring their accountability to the poor and serving local needs in a consistent and rational way. In some cases, they have divided the urban space into zones

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[31] Maria Cristina Paciello, 'Gli islamisti arabi e la questione sociale', in *Storia evoluzione dell'islamismo arabo,* ed. Laura Guazzone (Milano: Mondadori, 2015).

[32] Author's interview with the president of the association B.D., 20 May 2016.

of intervention so that each association is charged with serving a specific neighborhood. For instance, in Tunis, the popular neighbourhood of Hay Etthadamen is served by only a few associations that divide a list of beneficiaries. Similarly in Sfax, charitable work in the most marginalized neighbourhoods, such as Hay al-Khazanet, is carefully divided among those associations which are located in the area coordinating charitable missions. On the basis of this grid of intervention, associations have created shared databases in order to avoid duplicate interventions. This careful division of labour is one of the indicators of the embeddedness of charitable associations; an informal socio-political network, characterized by strong kinship ties which strengthen social participation and/or the recruitment of activists. Indeed, during the authoritarian regime, charitable work related to religion was initially characterized by community-based activities within the Movement of Islamic Tendency (MIT). As reported by several associations' founding fathers, charitable activities were not a specific by-product of the Revolution but they re-emerged in the post-revolutionary public space as the continuation of earlier social welfare activities conducted in secretive conditions: 'During the strong repression of the '90s, the Islamic movement organized a charitable network in order to assist prisoners' families and/or martyrs' widows and orphans.[33] According to a large number of interviewees, the solidarity network was mostly strengthened during the period of imprisonment under Ben Ali's regime:

> 'The time spent in prison was very hard as I was far from my family, however it represented an important experience for me as I reinforced friendship with my comrades in an extremely difficult environment. We have established a sort of solidarity network which is still alive'.[34]

It is within these interpersonal ties and this sense of mission that the potential lies for the expansion of the Islamic activism after 2011. Thus, Ennahda's older cadres took-up important roles, often

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[33] Author's interview with the president of the association N.K., 22 May 2016.

[34] Author's interview with an old activist of the MIT and president of a charitable association, 11 February 2016.

leading the process to start-up charitable associations: 'After the Revolution we could choose whether to keep playing a role in the party or go for social activities'.[35] Thus, several party cadres took charge of charitable associations. The first example of this hybridization between politics and the associative field pre-dates 2011, with the case of the association Marhama, founded in Germany 1999 by M. Jendoubi, Ennahda's leader in exile. After 2011, the opening of socio-political space allowed religious actors to take the stage with Marhama eventually being founded in Tunisia. Therefore, the associative field became an alternative sphere of Islamic engagement, a space of mobilization existing outside the party but partially overlapping with its partisan base: 'We are close to Ennahda, that is to say, we are not against the party, but we are not part of the party'.[36]

Religious charities and politics in a polarized context

Immediately after the revolution the boundaries between social and political activism were blurred, due to the multi-positionality of Islamic activists in the two spheres of engagement: 'especially at the start, activists were engaged in both spheres.[37] Mohamed, president of a charity in Sfax and former activist of the MIT, explains: 'At the beginning the association used to do everything, there was not a real distinction between political activity and social activity'.[38] The political embeddedness of Islamic charitable associations, unavoidably, put them in a confrontational game with secular/leftist associations, in a situation of crescent polarization that characterized the social field after 2011.

The strong presence of Ennahda in the associative world, particularly in the charitable activities became an issue against the party, accused of indirectly re-creating a system of hegemony linking the

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[35] Author's interview with an old MIT's activist and president of a charity, 15 May 2016.

[36] Author's interview with the president of the association T., 12 November 2015.

[37] Author's interview, Tunis, 20 May 2016.

[38] Author's interview with the president of the association M., 21 May 2016.

machine of social aid to that of political control, like the quasi-unique party in the Ben Ali's regime.[39] Charities' increasing popularity among the most disadvantaged segments of the population grew as their ability to develop rapidly and to expand networks throughout the country eventually elicited a strong counter-reaction from secular-leftist associations. In some cases, especially in those areas of the country where the 'modernist/islamist' cleavage is more emphasized within the social fabric, we witness the attempt to create closer ties among Islamic associations in order to create a cohesive socio-political bloc 'to defend from the attack of modernist actors'.[40] This is the case in Tunis with the creation of the Tunisian Front of Islamic associations (*al-jabhat al-tunisiyya al-jami'iat al-islamiyya*) whose goal was to bring together the Tunisian Islamic forces to 'fight against secularism in Tunisia, the desecration of Islam and the insertion of *sharia* in the constitution'.[41]

The Tunisian front was particularly active during 2012, when the socio-political space was more confrontational, and the social bloc was the main organizer of demonstrations and protests in front of the Constituent Assembly. Several Islamic associations, including charities and preaching associations linked to Salafi movements, took part in this bloc, trying to counteract the secularization of the country. Some figures, like H. Ellouze and S. Shourou, historical leaders of Ennahda's party, distinguished themselves as those able to make a bridge between the party and the associative sphere.[42] On 23 March 2012, the Front organized demonstrations to react against World Theatre Day. Moreover, on September 14 it contributed to setting up the demonstration moving from the mosque al-Fath to the American embassy, with the Front supporting a sit-in, in front of the American embassy,

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[39] Sana Ben Achour, 'Société civile en Tunisie: les associations entre captation autoritaire et construction de la citoyenneté', in *Les sociétés civiles dans le monde musulman*, eds. Anna Bozzo and Pierre-Jean Luizard (Paris: La Découverte, 2011).

[40] Author's interview with the president of the association N.K., 22 January 2017.

[41] Interview with the president of a charitable association which took part in the Front, 13 February 2017.

[42] Merone Fabio, Ester Sigillò and Damiano De Facci, 'Nahda And Tunisian Islamic Activism'.

to express the discontent about movies insulting the prophet Mohammed being shown in America. Last but not least, the Front participated in the petition against the UGTT strike, organized for December 13, against the government of the Troika.[43] Islamic charities, *da'wa* associations and imams' associations signed the petition in support of Ennahda.

The 'modernist' camp reacted vehemently to the mobilizations of the Islamic front, through counter-mobilizations. As a consequence, the party started discussions around its strategic platform in such a contentious political landscape. At the IX Congress in June 2012, the party leadership prompted a debate on the division between preaching and political activities, proposing that the group's more conservative members participate in civil society independently from party politics.[44] Ennahda's emphasis on a religiously oriented civil society after 2011 was both a strategy for demonstrating to its political enemies a willingness to relinquish any religious reference as a political party, as well as a move to assert its control over a new Islamic civil society, which was obliged to work under secretive conditions during the authoritarian regime.[45] Thousands of religiously oriented associations henceforth appeared to the 'modernist' forces as a party strategy to diversify its Islamist agenda in a time of political constraint.

Summer 2013 marked a watershed with Ennahda's official discourse revolving around its detachment from an Islamist political project. Following the political assassinations of the two leftist activists Choukri Belaid and Mohamed Brahmi, and the military coup against the MB in Egypt, the pressure against Islamic actors peaked, with 'modernist' forces demanding the dismissal of the Ennahda-led government. The party then undertook a series of actions aimed at increasing its national

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[43] 'Troika' was an unofficial name for the alliance between the three parties (Ennahda, Ettakatol and CPR) that ruled in Tunisia after the 2011 Constituent Assembly election. Ali Laarayedh (Ennahda) stepped down as prime minister on 9 January 2014.

[44] Rory McCarthy, "Protecting the sacred: Tunisia's Islamists Movement Ennahda and the challenge of free speech", ,*British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 42, no. 4 (2015): 447 – 464.

[45] Merone Fabio, Ester Sigillò and Damiano De Facci, 'Nahda And Tunisian Islamic Activism'.

legitimacy. It made compromises on a draft of the Constitution under discussion, by abandoning the idea of inserting *sharia*; it cut its ties with the Salafi-jihadist organization Ansar al-Sharia, declared a terrorist group in August 2013; and it left power to a technocratic government in January 2014.

The Jomaa government, a result of the national dialogue undertaken in the aftermath of the political crisis, started a campaign to restore state's control—backed by 'modernist' forces such as the allies of the old regime—over mosques and to those activities which had been accused of being politically related to Ennahda and of causing the 'Wahhabization' of Tunisian society.[46] Religiously oriented associations then became the target of police operations, which intended to verify the legality of their activities. Unscheduled *ad hoc* police inspections at charitable associations premises became very frequent since 2014. The main mechanism of pressure and control was over procedures of accounting. After terrorist attacks in 2015, through this device many associations were sanctioned with the accusation of hiding illicit funding linked to terrorist activities. The sanctions provided for the suspension of an association from one to three months, the possibility of freezing its assets or even the definitive closure of the association.

According to the minister for the General Direction for Political Parties and Associations, a structure attached to the Presidency of the Government since 2011: 'The current law on association is too ambiguous, leaving newly developed associations to do what they want. I refer in particular to religious associations. For this reason we have to intervene without any flexibility'.[47] Hereafter, since 2014 associations have been sanctioned because they did not register the receipt of foreign funding, or because their statute was not clear or it breached law 88, or just because they have been suspected of having links with terrorist groups.[48] Charitable associations reacted to these measures with an increasing feeling of frustration against a state perceived as politically biased, as it was during the

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[46] Author's interviews with the representatives of secular associations in Tunis and Sfax.

[47] Author's interview with the responsible of General Direction for Political Parties and Associations, 3 July 2018.

[48] Data obtained by the Secretary of the Presidency of the Government, 29 June 2018.

authoritarian regime. Indeed, as reported in many interviews, activists assimilated the government to the state, by strategically recalling an old cleavage—the authoritarian state vs. the people—in order to emphasize their legitimacy as civil society actors. As stated by an Islamist activist during an interview: 'Our association, as many other charitable associations developed after the Revolution, is close to Ennahda, that is to say, we are not against the party as we share its same values, but we are not part of the party. Just for the fact to be close to Ennahda we are now persecuted by the state'.[49] Several associations stress the fact that there was a clear change in measures of state control after 2013, clearly linked to a political campaign against Ennahda : 'The state attack was in order to attack Ennahda; I am wondering why the state did not control secular charitable associations'·[50] In some cases, interviewees adopted a clear political stand against the state, by claiming that 'The state does not allow the existence of charity in this country, because it would like to maintain its clientelist networks as before the Revolution'.[51]

Charities and their coping strategy: being professional as civil society actors

Since 2014, in light of the ongoing specialization process, charitable associations have taken an increasingly technocratic turn, separating civic engagement from the political sphere. More precisely, over the past few years, there was a transformation of the framings, structure, role and activities of Tunisian religiously oriented charities conforming with international donors and state standards of professionalization. This process seems to run parallel to the party's transformation as well. As stated by an old cadre of the MIT and president of a popular a charitable association in Tunis: 'We specialize in the field of civil society whereas Ennahda specializes in political affairs'.[52] The new strategy has

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[49] Author's interview with the secretary general of the association W., 11 July 2018.

[50] Author's interview with the president of the association R.E., 28 July 2018.

[51] Author's interview with the president of the association N.K., 12 July 2018.

[52] Author's interview with the president of the association T.C., 5 July 2017.

also spurred other changes. Several members of the associations, interviewed for this paper explained the willingness of their associations to broaden the range of activities to the sector of 'social development' (*tanmia ijtima'ia*), in order to obtain a renewed legitimacy at the international level, going beyond—at least in a level of discourse—the religious pretext of the association.

Furthermore, associations started to organize seminars and workshops for 'capacity building', 'good practices' and 'good governance'.[53] Charitable associations have developed an increasingly legalist and technical discourse to compete with secular NGOs in attracting Western international funding. The new effort was mainly to escape the general suspicion of the Tunisian leftist-secular associations about the financial relationship between Islamic charitable associations and Gulf donors. This rebranding had a striking impact on how charities present themselves to the public. During interviews, several responded to the question on their core identity by refraining from employing the terms 'Islamic' and 'religious'; instead referring to themselves as 'good Muslims in a Muslim country'. Moreover, some associations distance themselves from other charities by claiming to be acting under a humanitarian pretense, rather than in accordance to religious principles, often referring to international norms as an instrument of legitimacy: 'Our charitable activities are not based on religious reference, but they are inspired to humanitarian standards set up by international organizations, such as the United Nations'.[54]

In Sfax, where Islamic charities are abundant, associations have started to compete on their level of professionalization. For instance, Sfax Charity, the biggest and most professionalized charity in the governorate, was originally called Rahma (Mercy), and its founding fathers came out of the MIT after 2011. As with many other charitable associations throughout Tunisia, after summer 2013, the association changed its name to Sfax Charity and expanded into 'social development' and 'local governance' activities. Moreover, the association has specific job positions to be covered by

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[53] Author's interview, with the president of the association R.E., 28 June 2018.

[54] Author's interview with the president of the association R.E., 28 July 2018.

professional figures, such as consultants and project managers. Founding fathers themselves have undertaken training and specialization courses in order to develop professional skills. Therefore, thanks to this process of professional development, old militants and leaders of the association are employed. For instance, Mr. M. Ammar, a founding member, today covers the position of the association's external consultant. This pattern is prevalent even in the most conservative regions of Southern Tunisia, such as Médenine, where religion has historically influenced activities of social mobilization.

As a result of repression, charitable associations began a process of adaptation to the neoliberal civil society paradigm, most notably in the direction of a 'managerialization' of the associative practices, with particular attention paid to their financial management. Indeed, many associations have hired an accounting expert 'in order to avoid problems with the state'. [55] It is emblematic that during my fieldwork, the leaders of the associations showed me the financial registers before the beginning of the interviews, expressing concern for transparency and a desire to legitimize the managerial procedures. The professionalization of associations, therefore, became not only a virtuous practice to learn, but also a means of defence against: 'An attack from the state […]. We must perfect our work to avoid being attacked on bureaucratic issues. Now the accounts are all in order, with the complete list of the monetary transactions coming from our national and international donors'. [56]

Professionalization became a necessity for the existence of charitable associations with religious standing. However, as also stated by some activists, the professionalization of their associations does not hamper their commitment as to Islamic values:

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[55] Author's interview with the president of the association S.K., 13 July 2018.

[56] Author's interview with the president of the association N., 15 July 2018.

'This transformation actually represents an evolution, which follows the program of elaboration of a 'modern Islam, that is to say the conception of technical solutions to live any sector of life according to the Islamic norms: it is about adapting the values of Islam to the contemporary context, since it is possible to live modern life while respecting the distinction between the lawful and the illicit'.[57]

According to several presidents of associations, the professionalization should be associated with network strategies: 'We have to become professional and to create networks in order to resist to the aggression of the state. In other words, we have to co-ordinate ourselves'.[58] This strategy had an impact on the composition of networks involving different kinds of religious actors. Therefore, the Tunisian Front of Islamic associations left the space to specialized networks involving only charitable associations. These networks are not spontaneously activated but they are managed by big professionalized associations which act as umbrella organizations. This is the case for the association O., which was created in 2014 exactly for this purpose. Indeed, this association has activated a solid network of charitable associations oriented to 'development activities' throughout the country, only after having assured a training package on capacity building: 'We need to reinforce local partnerships in order to emerge, to create associative networks'.[59] An exemplary case is represented by the creation of new networks activated in several regions of the country, aiming at developing a social milieu composed only of charitable associations after the failure of more political-oriented Islamic networks.

The Government crackdown on Islamic associations since 2014 affected a strategical change in charities' relationships with local administrations. As observed during field visits in different regions of the country, charitable associations progressively engaged in partnerships with regional administrations, whereas a contentious repertoire of mobilization is expressed only vis-à-vis the

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[57] Author's interview with the president of the association D., 16 July 2018.

[58] Author's interview with the president of association B.D., 25 May 2016.

[59] Author's interview with the vice-president of the association O., 2 July 2017.

central government in Tunis. The latter, not entirely favourable to Ennahda after 2014, is strategically called 'state' by Islamic charities in order to identify its practices with those of the past regime, the strong state taking control of local associations. The relationships of charities with local officials are somewhat legitimized on the basis of shared feelings of territorial belonging, rather than on the basis of political competition. In the majority of cases, the presidents of the associations belong to the local notability, as such they are presented and present themselves as invaluable mobilizers of resources and having personal contacts with local state officials. Presidents of associations rely on these local ties in order to create opportunities for collaboration and, in doing so, gain a renewed legitimacy at the national level. However, it should be noted that after the Revolution, Ennahda's activists also penetrated local institutions as a compensation for past repression. In some cases—such as in the governorate of Sfax and Médenine—the collaboration is based mostly on a common political affiliation.

Direct collaborative relationships between charitable associations and local administrations can exist, through the common organization of events, such as supplying material at the beginning of the school year for children of the poorest families. These collaborative relationships can also occur indirectly, with the authorities sharing the lists of aid recipients, with the charitable associations, as observed in the municipality of Sfax: 'Charitable associations can be a resource for the state as they are more rooted in the social fabric, knowing better where the state has to intervene'.[60]Aside from their role as subsidiary actors, charities also collaborated with local municipalities as facilitators for the implementation of the participatory budget. For instance, several associations in Sfax municipality took part in 'awareness campaigns' on the topic citizenship in order to set up the participatory budget. Therefore, thanks to these new forms of collaboration, Islamic charities do not present themselves any more as an alternative model to reorganize society, one that stands in contrast to the state and challenges it. Rather, they are more and more dependent on the state and seek to work within the

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[60] Author's interview with the mayor of Gremda (municipality of Sfax) and Ennahda's supporter, 23 October 2018.

existing institutions and arrangements, not to alter them. As a matter of fact, Islamic charities have little cause to challenge the state: they receive from the state their permits and their financial aid. Beside the renewed relationships with local administration, the transformation also implied new forms of interactions between the Islamist charities and their secular peers on the local level. The most important examples are the new forms of engagement of charity organizations in local mobilizations for territorial claims, especially those concerning environmental causes. Since the political crisis of 2013, these new forms of engagements seem to have become a pattern throughout Tunisia, a strategy by religiously oriented charities to gain a newer legitimacy. In the governorate of Siliana, a charitable association has integrated with a local network in order to advocate for the right of development and to fight against a polluting enterprise.[61] Also, in Sfax, were the 'secular-islamist' divide is historically higher, several charities founded by Islamic activists have invested in campaigns for the closure of the phosphate processing plant SIAPE. Evidence of Islamic charities' transformation is also observable in most conservative regions of Southern Tunisia, such as Médenine, where in 2016 charitable associations joined their secular counterparts in mobilizations against polluting enterprises in the region. Therefore, having emerged as actors mobilizing for specific Islamic claims, such as the insertion of *sharia* in the Constitution or the imams' freedom of preaching, charities have shifted to new kinds of mobilizations, more related to territorial initiatives. In other words, the difficulty of justifying a religious commitment in a political context characterized by the increasing de-legitimization of religious actors, have pushed Islamic activists to frame alternative mobilizations based on a 'common good', serving the city beyond the Islamic community. This adjustment is achieved through the process of hybridization of urban Islamic networks.

The reconfiguration of a grassroots Islamist network beyond party politics

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[61] Author's interview with the president of charitable association A., 7 December 2016.

The creation of a professional network has been functional for the division of activities into zones of interventions, and the creation of shared databases of beneficiaries, while only implicitly for the defence of Islamic values. This trend, however, is far from being contested. The main criticisms came from charitable associations outside the network, which decided not to join, as it is 'too involved in party affairs'.[62] Other criticisms actually stem from an increasing deception of Islamic activists engaged in the associative field, especially those belonging to the first generation of militants. They are extremely disappointed by Ennahda's new politics of compromise with the 'modernist' forces, as the party has neglected the *da'wa* dimension, which is crucial to attain the Islamist political project. Therefore, they have preferred to transpose Islamic values into society by distinguishing themselves from a party, which was perceived as threatening its constituency:

> 'The party now plays the game of professional politics, at negotiating compromises with other parties. I prefer to concentrate on concrete things, such as developing the charity association. As a former activist I feel more satisfied like that. The new generation of activists, on the other hand, is different. Young activists love to play at politics, but they are completely detached from the values of Islam'.[63]

Charitable associations count among their members old activists of Ennahda who consider their action in the association as the highest form of political engagement:

> 'The associations are the true form of religious activism, not the political party. Politicians have nothing but the empty political games of political parties, including Ennahda'.[64]

The transformative changes illustrated above are not at odds with charitable associations' perception of themselves as part of a 'non-revolutionary' Islamic movement—one that draws its origins from the MIT, then flowed into the Ennahda party. Rather, that they have independently organized and

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[62] Author's interview with the president of the association N.K., 22 May 2016.

[63] Author's interview with the president of the association K.T., 25 May 2016.

[64] Author's interview with the president of the association N.K., 23 May 2016.

coordinated their components within the social fabric, following a process of 'specialization'. It is interesting to observe that charitable associations are located in those zones where other Islamic associations exist, creating a sort of Islamic-oriented mutual aid service area where different types of Islamic organizations are locally connected with charities. An exemplary case is the change in logistics of charitable associations. Sarah Ben Nefissa noted that a key reason for the financial success of Islamic associations is that they position themselves in areas where large parts of the population have money that can be redistributed.[65] It is not a coincidence that in Sfax and in Tunis the new commercial neighbourhoods of the cities (Berge du Lac and Centre Urbain Nord, in Tunis, and Sfax Jadida, in Sfax) have been almost entirely covered by a vast network of social institutions with religious orientation, such as *da'wa* associations, the Imams' Association, the Association of Islamic Economics, Zakat Association, charities and other religious associations. Each association has its specialization and is complementary to the other. For instance, the association of Islamic Economics functions as a think tank for the Islamic public emerging after the Revolution and has the task of broadening research on the applicability of Islamic values into the market economy. The Zakat Association is a pivotal actor in the resource mobilization of a local Islamic ecosystem as it can address people wishing to pay zakat to charitable associations or, on the contrary, it can provide sound contacts to charitable associations for fund-raising.

From this perspective, the process of professionalization of Islamic charities represents a coping strategy allowing the reconfiguration of an informal network after a severe political crisis which had highly de-legitimized Islamic actors throughout the country. As stated by an Ennahda's party cadre: 'thanks to the specialization, the Islamic public sphere is diversified, so the risk for the Movement to be weakened by the 'modernist forces' is lower'.[66] It can be observed that the narrative

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[65] Sarah Ben Nefissa, 'Le mouvement associatif égyptien et l'Islam. Elements d'une problématique', *Maghreb-Machrek*, 135 (1992): 19-135.

[66] Author's interview with an Ennahda's cadre party and founding member of a religious association, 22 May 2019.

on the cleavage between 'modernist' and Islamist actors is still part of rhetoric about a Tunisian associative system that is highly polarized. Aside from restyling their associations and altering their activities somewhat, most of the founders of charitable associations are still somehow involved in mobilizations for the defense of Islamic values. While in official communications they relinquished a distinctly Islamic identity and downplayed religious motivators, this was done in order to defend their association against the accusation of being politicized. However, this separation from politics does not jeopardize the ideological standing of the associations' founders.

In August 2018, a large Islamic public demonstration, with the participation of charitable and preaching associations, took to the streets to protest a proposal for a series of constitutional amendments in the areas of gender equality and human rights. The non-governmental National Coordination for the Defence of the Qur'an, the Constitution and Equitable Development, together with *da'wa* associations, organized the demonstration against the report issued by the Individual Freedoms and Equality Committee (COLIBE). The protesters, with a banner reading 'Quran text before any other text', accused the committee, created by presidential initiative in August 2017, of acting contrary to the teachings of Islam. This mobilization echoed all those protests undertaken by the Islamic front in 2012-2013, but for one main difference: the initiative was formally labeled as a 'civil society mobilization for the support of Islamic values'.[67] Thus, respecting the rule of the civil society autonomy from the political sphere and at the same time 'de-responsibilizing' Ennahda from the accusation, by the 'modernist' forces, of pursuing objectives linked to Political Islam. From this perspective religiously oriented associations might be interpreted as activators of Islamic values from below. Some actors belonging to Ennahda's most conservative ideological current or old militants who left the party after its pragmatic turn, have indeed seized the specialization as an opportunity to

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[67] Extract retrieved from several interviews with party's members and activists taking part in the mobilizations.

recombine together the political and religious spheres: '*Da'wa* is the true politics. It's crucial to develop it from below, from the associative field.'.[68]

Beside the formal division of activities, the persistence of the multi-positionality of Ennahda's activists between party and associations allows for an informal coordination between the two spheres. As a matter of fact, some charismatic preachers, stand out as 'connectors of spaces' between the party and this associative field.

A large number of activists interviewed also justified their engagement in civil society according to the principle of subsidiarity or complementarity, in light of the party's specialization process. From this perspective, they consider *da'wa* associations as the best vectors of Islamic principles, which have been progressively neglected by the party: 'As an Islamist militant I feel better as an associative member than a member of the party. Ennahda has to play 'professional politics' in order to survive in the party competition with the old regime forces'.[69] This position is confirmed by some party officials, who see mobilizations for Islam as a mandate of religious affairs to civil society actors:

> 'The party cannot use religion as an argument anymore. The specialization process
> has made it possible to distinguish the two spheres, so that the mobilization for
> religious affairs is civil society's engagement, the undertaking of *da'wa*
> associations'.[70]

If, on the one hand, party leaders seem to imply that 'religion' is an apolitical commitment, then on the other, Islamist actors engaged in the civil society continue to refer to da'wa as a political act. In light of this, the authentic Islamist ideology seems to exclusively pertain to the associative sphere,

[68] Extract retrieved from Ridha Jawadi's facebook page (old MIT militant), Facebook, 15 June 2019, https://www.facebook.com/ridha.jaouadi.9https://www.facebook.com/ridha.jaouadi.9

[69] Author's interview with the vice-president of the association D.I., 10 July 2018.

[70] Author's interview with the party's spokesperson, Tunis, 13 October 2018.

while the the political party has the residual role to play in the country's political game. As stated by the president of a popular *da'wa* association in Sfax, a former militant of the Movement of Islamic Tendency: 'Of course I want an Islamic state. But the only way to get there is to teach society through da'wa. As a *da'wa* association we have a political role'.[71]

Interestingly, the above mentioned mobilizations organized by the Islamist activists engaged in the civil society sphere, have been also coordinated with the help of other actors, such as people related to Salafi movements, which have mostly engaged in the associative field:

> 'We are not with Ennahda, we don't agree anymore with its political agenda, but in this particular moment we mobilize with its former activists engaged in the associations, as they distance themselves from the party logic, which is based on rotten compromises with secular forces'.[72]

Here, the frustration and the sense of betrayal of Ennahda's old militants engaged in the associative sector seem to have also triggered new relational dynamics with more 'radical' actors. Indeed, some association founded by former Ennahda activists started to re-build new ties with Salafi-based associations, after Ennahda's official cut with Salafism in 2013. For instance, several charitable associations are weaving new informal ties with Islamic associations of religious education in order to organize common activities or common demonstrations involving respective founding members and beneficiaries. As stated by a preacher teaching in a Quranic school, and who presented himself as a Salafi activist: "We work all together outside party politics, for the sake of our Islamic community".[73]

Conclusion

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[71] Author's interview with the president of the association R., 20 October 2018.

[72] Author's interview with former president of a Salafi association banned by Tunisian government in 2015, 2 July 2018.

[73] Author's interview with the president of a Quranic school, 17 October 2019.

The goal of this article has been to shed light on the forms of Islamic engagement outside party politics and to discuss the implications of extra-party activism on the evolution of Political Islam. The case of post-revolutionary Tunisia is particularly relevant due to the recent pragmatic turn of Ennahda's party, the increasing role of religious associations after the fall of the authoritarian regime, and the circumstances of a highly polarized democratization process characterized by a strong securitization policy in recent years. The use of a relational approach brings Islamic activists' agency back into view, and enables to study their room for manoeuvre outside party politics. Thus, unlike most of the academic works which assimilated the analysis of activists' behaviours with the party's behaviour, the strategic relational approach allows to highlight the variety of choices that associative *players* can strategically make (or not make) in a perceived challenging environment, such as period of intense political conflict.

As shown in the article, associations' choices may depend on logic that differs from the party's political strategies. If, in the first two years after the Revolution, religious associations developed as a social force parallel to Ennahda, after the political crisis of 2013, they have gradually taken an ambivalent stand towards the party, by conforming to norms and rules and by serving different projects beyond the Islamist agenda. Notably, findings reported in this paper highlight three different trajectories of Islamic activists engaged in charitable associations.

The first trajectory is a process of professionalization of Islamic charities, according to which part of the associative sphere claims its autonomy from the political sphere. This transformation led religiously oriented charitable associations to reshape their relationships with the state and politics. This evolution has undoubtedly had some consequences, as Islamic activism has been progressively framed on an 'activities' basis and not manifestly on a 'political ideology' basis.

The second trajectory pertains to a complementarity between the party and the associative sphere in light of the specialization process. In this respect, findings presented have highlighted that religious associations have proved to be the sphere of activation for Islamic values, officially abandoned by Ennahda. The analysis of the August 2018 mobilizations has shown how associations

have acted as safe-keepers of Islamic values on behalf of Ennahda's party. Interestingly, unlike in 2012-2013, these mobilizations were labeled as occurring in the civil society sphere, for the sake of legitimacy of both the party members and Islamic activists engaged in the associative field.

Last but not least, this research has shed light on an emerging third trajectory. Some activists engaged in charitable associations have recently adopted a more critical stand vis-à-vis the party. Most of the activists belonging to this associative network are former militants who experienced the Ennahda's specialization as a betrayal. Consequently, they left the party and adopted a confrontational position with the latter by developing narratives of 'resistance' towards the party's pragmatic turn and by building new relationships with Salafi associations outside party politics. Findings outlined in this article show how these three trajectories are not mutually exclusive. The article shows how the shift from party politics to civil society does not necessarily represent a process of de-ideologization of Islamic activists, but instead, can be a way to continue mobilizing around Islamic principles by other means. In fact, the restyling of ideas and practices of associations has first of all represented an opportunity for the mobilization of resources and the reconfiguration of a social network of Islamic inspiration. As such, the adaptation of charitable associations might be interpreted as a coping strategy of Islamic activists in a challenging environment. In other words, the transformations of charitable associations can coexist with a differentiated relation to Political Islam. This research paves the way for new research that may investigate how, in the long run, these trajectories may result in different outcomes.