WORKING PAPER

Shifting from Party Politics to Civil Society: hybrid trajectories of Islamist engagement in post-authoritarian Tunisia

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Abstract

This study investigates why and how Tunisian Islamist activists committed to new forms of socio-political engagement alongside, or as an alternative to, the Ennahda party since the fall of the authoritarian regime. Notably, thanks to the opening of social and political opportunities occurred in 2011, several militants of the Tunisian Islamist movement, developed in the 1970s and institutionalized as a party in 1989, have undertaken new pathways of engagement in faith-based associations and, more recently, in new political networks rooted in the social fabric. Based on this observation, the paper inquires how activists' trajectories outside the Islamist party eventually transformed their relationship with the Ennahda party itself and, in more general terms, with politics. Drawing on strategic interactionism, this study accounts for the activists' motivations to explore new forms of socio-political commitment, as well as the transformations of Islamic activism when it comes to shifting venues of engagement. As shown, Islamist activists emerge in the post-authoritarian arena as strategic players interacting with the Ennahda party according to different relational logics: professional emancipation, the party's complementarity, the political challenge. Overall, this article challenges a linear and one-dimensional interpretation of the transformation of the Tunisian Islamist movement by shifting the unit of analysis from the political party to individual activists. In this regard, drawing on the Tunisian case, this study provides a theoretical framework to account for the hybrid forms of Islamic activism in a time of political change.

Keywords

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Introduction

The literature on the Islamist party's ideological transformation has grown considerably in recent years. However, few works focused on the trajectories taken by Islamist activists outside the political party and, most importantly, on the broader implications that the pluralization of modes of engagement has on the transformation of Islamic activism. Drawing on the Tunisian case, this study, at the crossroads of Islamic studies and Social Movements studies, aims at disentangling the hybrid trajectories of engagement of Islamist activists in a time of deep political change.

Unlike in other countries, since its origins in the 1970s, Islamic activism in Tunisia has been heavily opposed not only by the state, but also by broad strata of society. This opposition has, over time, pushed the Islamist movement to carry out a series of adaptive strategies to cope with the constraining environment. The collapse of the authoritarian regime in 2011 allowed Islamist activists to take the stage after several years of engagement under conditions of secrecy (Wolf, 2017). In addition to the legalization of Ennahda – which emerged during the first free elections in October 2011 as a mass religious party – civil society has become a new space of Islamic activism. Religious associations developed as new spaces of engagement for Islamist activists. This group is composed of the old generation of militants and of a new generation of activists, who did not experience militancy within the original Islamist movement and joined the party after 2011.

This study investigates the forms of extra-party, socio-political engagement of this Islamist constellation.[1] In light of this, the research has two goals. First, this article enquires into the variety of modes of engagement of Islamist activists outside the Ennahda party. Second, it aims to understand how extra-party engagement eventually transforms activists' positions vis-à-vis the political sphere. The goal of the article is to account for the broader implications of extra-party forms of engagement on the transformation of Islamic activism in Tunisia. In doing so, it investigates the relational dynamics between religious associations and Ennahda from the fall of the authoritarian regime in 2011 until the last elections of 2019, when the Islamist party lost more than one-third of its electorate. Specifically, this study investigates how religious associations have positioned themselves vis-à-vis the party's changing political agenda.

The paper challenges a linear and one-dimensional understanding of Islamic activism. While in a context of political transition, the strategy of party cadres may undergo a process of ideological transformation, activists who mobilize outside party politics can follow different trajectories. Findings reveal that this is the case for Islamic activists who are initially close to the Islamist party but can, over time, position themselves according to different repertoires and logics of action, and that their choice paves the way to different trajectories of Islamic activism. Religious associations developed in Tunisia after 2011 act as new players outside the Islamist political party and in shifting arenas of mobilizations (Jasper, 2004). As shown in the analysis, these players can interact with the party according to different logics, depending on internal or external factors. Islamic associations, for instance, can maintain their distance from the political party through a process of professionalization, they can follow a logic of complementarity with the political party, or they can challenge the party by mobilizing for a

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[1] Immediately after the fall of the regime in 2011, Islamic activism in Tunisia crystallized into two main political trends: Islamism, fully represented by the party Ennahda, and Salafism, mainly composed of the party *Jabhah al-Islah* and the Salafi-jihadi movement *Ansar al-Sharia*. This article focuses on the trajectories of Islamist activists who drew their origins from the Tunisian Islamist movement or joined the Ennahda party after its full legalization in 2011.

political alternative. These three trajectories, as I will demonstrate, are not mutually exclusive, but their combination may result in hybrid forms of Islamic activism.

The article relies on immersive fieldwork carried out over three years in four Tunisian governorates differing for their social, political and economic backgrounds: Grand-Tunis, Siliana, Sfax, and Médenine. Despite their differences, data show a widespread shift of engagement from party politics to civil society in all the governorates under investigation, as a new form of Islamic activism. The research consisted in an analysis of party members' multipositionality and associated networks by combining semi-structured interviews, participant observation, document analysis of original material produced by Islamic associations, and social media analysis (Facebook, Twitter and Instagram). Different methods of data collection were particularly useful in understanding the network strategies of Islamist activists beyond party politics.[2]

Islamism and social movement: structure, agency, and interactions

The transformation of Islamist parties all over the world pushed many scholars to focus on the reasons for, and the implications of, their ideological change. Authors such as Olivier Roy (1992, 1999) and Asef Bayat (1996) have conceptualized this process of ideological transformation as the failure of political Islam and through the category of post-Islamism. According to the definition given by Olivier Roy, Islamism (or Political Islam) – as an ideology – is a political project of transformation of state and society according to Islamic principles (Roy, 1992). The failure of political Islam thus highlights the fact that Islamism, as a process of societal and political change according to the Islamic perspective, had failed. According to Roy, this impasse comes either from the aporias of the Islamist political and societal ideological project, when it has to be converted into a government program because of the state's repression, or the crackdown of the political field, which led Islamic actors to reformulate their original project (Roy, 1999: 11). However, despite its failure as a political project, Roy posits that Islamism remains a factor of social mobilization (1999).

However, most of the academic literature on Islamist ideological transformation based its analysis largely on the party's politics and did not account for the changes occurring through the multipositionality of Islamist activists in different spheres of engagement. Drawing on social movement literature, the present study, instead, investigates the transformative dynamics of Islamic activism by focusing on the extra-party dimension. Notably, this article focuses on the mobilization dynamics of Islamist activists engaged with associations. Findings show that the interactions between the party and a religious-based associative field are far from being functionally designed, and Islamist activists engaged in the associations can undertake different trajectories beyond the party logic and its political agenda. Therefore, this study also highlights the circumstances in which Islamic associations opted for different modes of action and interacted differently, vis-à-vis the Islamist party Ennahda's political position. The acknowledgment of these associations' agency is thus crucial in order to grasp the trajectories of Islamic activism according to different sets of objective or subjective opportunities.

Social movement literature has, from its origins, emphasized the variety of the political opportunity structure (Tarrow, 1994; Kriesi, 2004) in shaping social movements' modes of action. However, new approaches have challenged structuralist theories by emphasizing the dynamics of strategic interactions among the different actors involved. Ganz has argued that "surprisingly little attention is paid to examining in a given movement situation, what activists themselves believe their strategic options to be and how these get evaluated and debated

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[2] Data collection took place from September 2015 to October 2019. Anonymity is maintained to protect those interviewed; several names of associations and their members are not mentioned in the text.

within the movement" (Ganz, 2009: 147). In a critique of neo-institutionalism, Fligstein and McAdam have extended Bourdieu's concept of fields, in which "actors make moves, and other actors have to interpret them, consider their options, and act in response"; in their view, even in non-conflictual fields "there is always a good deal of jockeying for advantage" (Flistein and McAdam, 2012: 10-12). Fligstein and McAdam thus introduce the concept of the 'strategic action fields', socially constructed arenas within which actors with varying resources and endowments vie for advantage (2012).

Taking a relational approach as an analytical tool implies the analysis of 'fields of interactions' rather than the investigation of the relationship between structure and agents. Indeed, systems are not inherently balanced or static, but rather consistently dynamic as they experience the pressures and strains of societal changes, events, and interactions. 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" (Jasper, 2004: 4). 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 behaviors. Thus, study of mobilization dynamics demands a more in-depth analysis of the actor's interactive dynamics to make sense of what they interpret as political opportunities at specific moments in time.

In light of the literature discussed above, there is nothing exceptional in Islam that should make Islamist movements unfit for using social movement theories (Wiktorowicz, 2003; Clark 2004; Donker 2019). In recent works on social movements in the North Africa and the Middle East some authors have adopted an interactionist perspective by highlighting the role of local networks (Volpi and Jasper, 2017; Volpi and Clark, 2019). However, these contributions have centered mainly on protest events and, in general, they have cast their analysis from a perspective of contentious politics. In more general terms, previous literature focused on Islamic movements as monolithic 'challengers', struggling against other political forces. Moreover, when it comes to the Tunisian case, most of the academic works have focused on the party as the main unit of analysis to account for the variations of the Tunisian Islamist movement (Cavatorta and Merone, 2013, Marks, 2015; Netterstrøm, 2015). This study applies a strategic relational approach (Goodwin and Jasper, 1999; Jasper, 2004; Jasper and Duyvendak, 2015; McGarry et al. 2016) to the evolution of the Tunisian Islamist movement beyond the political party. In this regard, it goes beyond a one-dimensional understanding of Islamic activism, by shifting the focus of the analysis from a meso-level, the political party as an organization, to a micro-level, activists as individuals. The strategic relational approach applied to a micro-level of investigation eventually unveils the hybrid trajectories of Islamic activism by highlighting the interactive dynamics between different spheres of engagement; moreover, this variety accounts for activists' different logics of actions. In other words, Islamist activists are agents acting beyond the political party as players confronting dilemmas, making choices, and interacting with other players within and outside the Islamist constellation. Overall, findings presented below demonstrate the utility of breaking down a one-dimensional interpretation of Islamic activism.

The transformation of Islamic activism: the separation between *hizb* and *haraka*

Tunisian Islamic activism developed in the 1970s in the form of an Islamic community inspired by the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhoods (*jama'a al-Islamyya*) and conceived the religion and politics as 'two parts of a whole' (*shumuliyya*). In other words, Islam was a global practice which does not differentiate religious from social or political activity. With the partial liberalization of the 1980s, the religious group transformed itself into a political movement, called 'Movement of the Islamic Tendency' (*harakat Ittijah al-Islami*).

Over time the Movement has undertaken a process of transformation by adapting to the windows of opportunity offered by the regime. In1989, the new president, Ben Ali, who initially seemed favorable to a policy of inclusion, allowed the creation of the party. In order to comply with Tunisian laws banning religious parties, Rached Ghannouchi, the party leader, decided to change the name of the organization from the Movement of Islamic Tendency (MIT) into Movement Ennahda (*Harakat Ennahdha)*, meaning 'rebirth', thus abandoning any Islamic reference.

The party's ideological transformation continued to be the key-concept of Ennahda's public discourse from early 2011 onwards. At the IX Congress in June 2012 Ennahda's leadership prompted a debate on the division in the party's activities between 'preaching' (*da'wa*, which means 'call') and 'politics,' proposing that the group's more conservative members participate in civil society independently from party politics (McCarthy 2015). Indeed, the legitimization of the social sphere of the movement became an important political strategy for Ennahda after 2011. After the fall of the authoritarian regime, many Islamist activists decided to engage in the associative field. Thousands of associations with religious references thus appeared as a means of 'parallel' or 'alternative' engagement to the party. According to a former MIT activist: "After the revolution, you could choose whether you joined the political party or the associations. However, especially at the start, activists were engaged in both spheres".[3] With the multi-positionality of activists, the boundaries between political and associative activity are blurred. The president of a Sfax charity and former activist of MIT, explains: "at the beginning, the association did everything, there was not a real distinction between political activity and social activity".[4] In addition, the day after the 9th Congress, party officials created a new association: *Da'wa wa al Islah* (DwI). Its objective is to unify or coordinate the activities of the various associations that had arisen spontaneously during the previous period (Merone et al., 2018).

The party has transformed over the years, in a context characterized by high pressure linked to the increasing polarization in the country and by the presence of the remnants of the old regime. In 2012, against a background of increasing socio-political conflict, part of the old regime's allies gathered the country's anti-Islamist forces into a new party, Nidaa 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 (Netterstrøm, 2015).

After the political assassinations of two political opposition activists and the military coup in Egypt, which dismissed the Muslim Brotherhoods from power in 2013, the pressure against the party in power peaked. During a demonstration in front of the National Parliament, thousands of demonstrators demanded the dissolution of the National Constituent Assembly and the dismissal of the Ennahda led government of Hamadi Jebali. Ennahda thus undertook a series of actions aimed at increasing its legitimacy among secular forces. In essence, it made compromises on a draft of the Constitution under discussion at the time by abandoning the idea of inserting *sharia* (Islamic law), it cut dramatically its ties with radical actors, such as Salafi organizations, and it agreed to relinquish power in favor of a technocratic government in January 2014. Undoubtedly, summer 2013 marked a watershed: from this moment, Ennahda's discourse revolved around its detachment from the Islamist project of transformation of Tunisian politics and society. Moreover, the victory of the party Nidaa Tounes at the 2014 elections, paved the way for an unexpected coalition government. Several activists perceived

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[3] Author's interview, Tunis, May 2016.

[4] Author's interview, Sfax, May 2016.

the compromise between Islamists and the forces of the old regime as a betrayal of revolutionary principles.

At the10th party Congress held in May 2016, the party leader Rachid Ghannouchi, declared: "There is no longer any justification for political Islam in Tunisia".[5] This statement was followed by the decision of the party's leadership to engage in the process of specialization (*taḫaṣṣus*), aiming at separating the political from the religious dimension. This measure thus entailed a distinction between two intertwined parts of the same political group: the partisan dimension (*hizb*) and the social movement (*haraka*). As Ghannouchi declared,

> 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 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.[6]

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

The rise of Islamic associations and their relationship with the Ennahda until 2013

After the fall of the Ben Ali regime, Ennahda activists played an essential role in the creation of associations of religious inspiration. Thanks to the Decree-law n. 88, dated September 2011, thousands of associations with a religious orientation have appeared in the renewed Tunisian public space.[7] This associative field emerged as the Ennahda's partisan milieu; some personalities, such as Habib Ellouze, Sadok Chourou, and Sahbi Atigue, historical leaders of Ennahda, stand out as 'connectors of spaces' between the two spheres of engagement (Merone et al. 2018).

Charitable associations (al-jamʿiyyât al-khayriyya) have become one of the most visible forms of the new activism of Islamic inspiration. However, charitable activities of a religious nature are not a specific by-product of the Tunisian revolution. During the crackdown on the Islamist movement in the 1990s, activists had already organized a charitable network to help the families of political prisoners during the regime's repression. As a former MIT activist notes: "Charity was one of the main activities of the movement in the fight against socio-economic exclusion from Islamist networks".8 The decision of the activists of the movement to engage in the charitable sector in post-revolutionary Tunisia represents a kind of 'revenge' of the opponents of the old regime, a form of pointed criticism of the clientelist practices in force under the regime of Ben Ali.

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[5] Cf. 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

[6] Ghannouchi, R. (2016). "From political Islam to Muslim Democracy: The Ennahda party and the future of Tunisia", *Foreign Affairs*, 95: 58.

[7] 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

[8] Author's interview with the president of a charitable association, Sfax, February 2016.

A second type of Islamic activism rooted in the associations is that of religious schools. According to the Imam of the Sharia's Science Association created after 2011, the Quranic associations that emerged after the revolution, questioned the Islamic education sponsored during the authoritarian regime: "During Ben Ali's regime, religious education was based on a pietist style of teaching Islam. This approach envisaged a domesticated Islam as an instrument of societal control to include like-minded groups and to exclude the challengers, such as the Islamist movement".9 After the 2011 revolution, a new wave of religious education has emerged into the public space, calling into question the traditional religious educational system, accused by the new preachers, who took over religious space after 2011, of being an ideological instrument of the ruling elite under Ben Ali (Merone et al., 2018). According to the president of the Quran association, "before the revolution, the people did not have access to true Islam: all the imams belonged to the RCD".10

A third form of Islamic activism consists in the rise of new, young and charismatic preachers acting in more informal public spaces, such as cafès or public squares (Merone et al., 2018). In the city of Sfax, for example, preaching activities have evolved around charismatic imams, such as Mohamed Affès, the preacher of the Great Mosque of Sfax, and Ridha Jaouadi, imam of the Lakhmi Mosque and president of the association of imams. Since 2011, these new religious figures have been praised as a positive byproduct of the revolution by the Islamic community, in contrast to the so-called 'Islam of state' characterized by the top-down appointment of imams. According to this revolutionary narrative, after the fall of the authoritarian regime, the new imams "have to be appointed by the people, by the Islamic community".11

In the period 2011-2013, Tunisia experienced high polarization, characterized by a growing confrontation between the 'Islamist' and 'modernist' forces around constitutional issues. In particular, the various constitutional projects drawn up within the National Constituent Assembly were symptomatic of these two antagonistic visions of Tunisian politics (Gobe and Chouikha, 2014). The associative sphere reflected this polarization until 2013, when during the first phase of the democratic transition, the boundaries between political society and civil society were blurred (Linz and Stepan, 1996). The strong presence of Ennahda activists in the associative world, especially in charity associations, had thus brought the opposition forces – including advocacy and human rights associations, ideologically close to the leftist political forces – to accuse the party of indirectly recreating a system of hegemony rooted in the social fabric, like the RCD under the regime of Ben Ali. Thus, the year 2012 saw the mobilization of several associations of religious inspiration counteracting the "political attack" of secular forces.12 The Tunisian Front of Islamic Associations (al-jabhat al-tunisiyya al-jami'iat al-islamiyya), composed of preaching and charitable associations, had the objective of bringing together Tunisian Islamic forces to "fight against secularism in Tunisia, the desecration of Islam and for the insertion of sharia in the constitution".13

The Front was particularly active in 2012 and 2013, at a time of a high polarization between Islamic forces and secular forces. The network was the main organizer of demonstrations outside of the constituent assembly. Several Islamic associations took part in this block and tried to fight against the "secularization" of the country, as evidenced by the slogans of the

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9 Author's interview, Tunis, July 2018.

10 The RCD (Rassemblement Constitutionnel Démocratique) was the quasi-hegemonic party under Ben Ali's regime. Author's interview, Tunis, July 2018.

11 Author's interview, Sfax, May 2016.

12 Author's interview extracts.

13 Facebook page of the Front.

activists. On March 16, 2012, the Front organized a demonstration, in which thousands of Tunisians took part, outside the ANC headquarters to demand the application of sharia law in the country's future constitution.14 On September 14, the Front organized a march from the Al-Fath mosque to the American embassy, and supported the sit-in in front of the embassy, in order to express its dissatisfaction with the screening of Persepolis, a film which allegedly insulted the prophet, on the private television channel Nessma TV. During the mobilizations aimed at overthrowing the Ennahda government, the Front participated in support of the party (Merone et al., 2018).

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

In the aftermath of the political crisis, the technocratic government of Mehdi Jomaa (independent), who took office in January 2014, launched a campaign to restore state control over mosques and Islamic associations. Activities accused of being of a political nature linked to Ennahda and of causing the Islamization of Tunisian society were also a target of the securitization measures. Several charitable associations with a religious orientation became the target of police operations aimed at verifying the legality of their activities. The primary pressure and control mechanism concerned the accounting and financing procedures. Since the 2015 attacks, many associations have been sanctioned through this channel for "concealment of illicit financing linked to terrorist activities".15 Sanctions varied from freezing the association's activities from one to three months or to a permanent ban.

Interviewees from several associations insist that there was an evident change in the measures of state control after 2014, in connection with the weakening of Ennahda at the national level. The president of a charitable association explains: "The state's measures are an attack against Ennahda. I wonder why the state did not control secular charitable associations as well".16 While Ennahda tried to mediate between secular forces and its Islamic constituency, the party also exploited the situation to push the party's activists engaged in civil society to engage in a professionalization that would reflect the separation between da'wa and politics. Thus, several party officials left the boards of Islamic associations once elected to the choura and vice versa; some members of the choura, in turn, left the party to focus on the activities of their associations and decided to devote themselves exclusively to the social sphere. As we will see in the next section, this process has encouraged and facilitated a parallel specialization of Islamic associations, according to a logic of professionalization.

The professionalization of Islamic associations

After the turn of 2013, the relationship between the party and religious associations has become more blurred, and the trajectories of the associative milieu have diversified. Indeed,

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[14] https://www.france24.com/fr/20120316-tunisie-manifestation-tunis-milliers-charia-constitution-religion-politique-assemblee-coran-islam-

[15] Author's interview with the general director of the presidential administrative section dealing with the affairs of political parties and associations, Tunis, July 2018.

[16] Author's interview, Tunis, June 2018.

after the party's alienation from Salafist currents, the alliance with secular forces, several Islamic associations distanced themselves from the political party.

The first trajectory is that of the professionalization of associations, guided by the concern to empower such organizations in the political sphere in the double context of increased control by the Jomaa government and specialization initiated by Ennahda. In particular, from 2014 onwards, associations of religious inspiration have been gradually transformed in terms of their structure and activities. As a former militant of the MIT and president of a charitable association in Tunis says: "We are looking to specialize in the field of civil society, while Ennahda specializes in political affairs".[17] Thus, in order to renew their legitimacy vis-à-vis the state and Western donors, several associative actors interviewed explained the desire of their organization to broaden the range of activities to other sectors, like that of social development (*tanmia ijtima'ia*), or human development (*tanmia bashariyya*). Several associations interviewed indicated that they had embarked on the organization of seminars and workshops on capacity building, good practices, and good governance, according to a logic of professionalization. The main aim of this new effort has been to dispel the general suspicion of financial relations between Islamist charities and donors from the Gulf.

This change has had a striking impact on the way charities present themselves to the public. Charities have started a process of transformation similar to that which can be found in other contexts, of the new managerial style of their practices, with particular attention given to financial management. Many associations have hired an accounting expert "in order to avoid problems with the State".[18] It is significant that during interviews with the associations' executive boards, the members of such boards usually insist on showing the financial records to their interlocutors, thus revealing concern for transparency and the desire to legitimize management procedures. The professionalization of associations has thus become not only good practice but also a tool to defend associations, as one exponent puts it, from "the attack of the State […]. We need to improve our work, as a way to avoid any attack from the state concerning bureaucratic issues. Now the accounts and registers are in order, with the full list of financial transactions from our national and international donors."[19]

During the interviews carried out, when asked about their primary identity, several individuals responded by refraining from using the terms 'Islamic' and 'religious'. [20] Moreover, a considerable number of associations have changed their names. For example, the charity *Rahma* (Mercy) changed its name in 2014, adopting a new name that had no religious reference; it has also expanded its sphere of activity to social development and local governance. However, the process of professionalization did not prevent religious-based associations perceiving themselves as part of an Islamic community. According to several association executives, professionalization should be linked to networking strategies: "we must become professional and create networks in order to resist the aggression of the State; in other words, we must coordinate". Professionalization has, therefore, become a necessity, a survival strategy, especially for those associations that have been targeted by government controls since 2014. The transformation of associations has also had an impact on the composition of the networks. The political failure of the Tunisian Front of Islamic Associations has given way to rising professionalized networks specialized in specific sectors of activity. Emblematic examples are the network of charitable associations in the governorate of Sfax, the network of local governance in Siliana and the network of social development in Médenine. From this

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[17] Author's interview, Tunis, October 2017.

[18] Author's interview, Médenine, February 2017.

[19] Author's interview with the president of a charitable association, Siliana, June 2016.

[20] Author's interview extracts.

perspective, the sectorialization of associative activities seems to represent a survival strategy in the hands of religious associations after a political crisis that had strongly delegitimized and weakened the country's Islamic actors. As an Ennahda sympathizer and leader of a *da'wa* association said: "Thanks to specialization, the Islamic public sphere has been diversified, which reduces the risk that countries' secular forces will weaken the movement".[21]

The reconfiguration of an Islamic associative network as complementary sphere of engagement

A discourse analysis of the interviews conducted reveals that many activists interviewed continue to perceive themselves to be part of an Islamist movement, despite the professionalization of their associations. Therefore, the trajectory underlined above is not in contrast with political mobilization. If a significant institutional consequence of the specialization process is the separation of careers between the leaders of the party and those of the associations of the other, we nevertheless observe that some activists, symbolic figures within the party, have kept their positions in the two fields, such as *sheikh* Habib Ellouze. Considering this fact, a second trajectory of the associative sphere is that of complementarity vis-à-vis the party.

While the founding fathers of some associations renounced claims to the Islamic identity of their associations officially and downplayed the religious motivations underlying their activities in order to defend themselves against the accusation of politicization, they did not question their ideological positions. They continue to mobilize for the defense of Islamic values within the framework of an associative network. The mobilizations organized against the COLIBE report represent an exemplary case.[22] In August 2018, members of Islamic associations took to the streets to protest against the proposals of legislative reforms relating to individual freedoms in the country, supposed to be at odds with the Quran's norms and principles. However, this mobilization was far from spontaneous, it was organized by a network of *da'wa* associations. The demonstrators marched with a banner bearing the inscription "The Quran before any other text", to affirm the primacy of the sacred text over civil law. They accused the Commission of having acted against the teachings of Islam. This mobilization echoed the demonstrations organized by the Front of Islamic Associations in 2012-2013, but with one significant difference: the initiative was qualified by its promoters as a "civil society mobilization"[23] and not as a political action. This shifting narrative seems to reflect the Ennahda's specialization strategy from the civil society perspective, and in turn it prevents the party from being accused by secular forces of pursuing an Islamist agenda at the political level. According to a former MIT militant and secretary general of the association DWI: "we mobilize because Ennahda cannot overexpose itself, it must compromise with the country's secular forces".[24] Also, as stated by the spokesperson for the Collective for the Defense of the Koran, and former militant of the MIT as well:

> This movement is not with Ennahda. Some Islamist activists are participating, but they are no longer with the party as they decided to engage

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[21] Author's interview, Tunis, July 2018.

[22] The Individual Liberties and Equality Commission (Colibe) was created by the former President of the Republic Béji Caïd Essebsi on August 13, 2017. It was responsible for preparing a report on the legislative reforms relating to individual freedoms in the country.

[23] Author's interviews with demonstrators, Tunis and Sfax, October 2018.

[24] Author's interview, Tunis, July 2018.

in the associative sector. It is a different logic, even if we share the same values.[25]

Several activists thus justify the specialization as a way to legitimize their work. As posited by some activists, the specialization helps to make things better: "According to our religion we have to develop preaching activities from the grassroots, and not from the top. The party is a too hierarchical structure".[26] Thus, Islamic activists rooted in the social fabric consider associations to be the true activators of Islamic values, which have to be progressively neglected by the party. In light of this, they ultimately legitimize the civil nature of the party, which has now formally engaged in a policy of compromise with the secular forces. This position is confirmed by party officials, who see the mobilization of associations as a kind of 'delegation' of religious affairs to civil society, within the framework of specialization:

> The party cannot use religion as an argument. The specialization process has made it possible to distinguish the two fields, politics and religion, so it is civil society that must mobilize for religious issues.[27]

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

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

> Thanks to specialization, the Islamic public sphere has been diversified, which reduces the risk of being undermined as a movement, by the attacks of our political enemies. We are an elastic force; we adapt.[28]

From this perspective the specialization is perceived by some activists as a survival strategy, following a political crisis that had strongly delegitimized Ennahda.

Political distancing: reconciliation with Salafism 'from below' and the rise of Itilaf Karama

The anti-COLIBE mobilizations involved other participants aside from Ennahda's activists, namely Salafi actors that had broken off relations with the Islamist party in 2013, and that since then had joined the associative field. As stated by an interviewee: "We are not at all with Ennahda and its political agenda, but in this particular moment we have the same objective: the defense of Islam with all possible means. So, it's a moral duty to mobilize together".[29] A closer look shows indeed that the 2018 protests represented an opportunity to re-establish new ties between the two groups. As a matter of fact, a reconciliation from below has recently occurred between Islamist and Salafi actors through the establishment and development of localized informal networks and shared associative activities in several cities of the country.

This phenomenon pertains to a third trajectory of Islamist activists who distinguished themselves in their critical positions vis-à-vis Ennahda, due to strong frustration and a sense of betrayal, which in turn led them to consider joining others with alternative political solutions.

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[25] Author's interview, Tunis, July 2018.

[26] Author's interview, Médenine, May 2017.

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

[28] Author's interview with the secretary-general of the association DwI, Tunis, June 2018.

[29] Author's interview with the president of a Salafi association banned in 2015, Tunis, August 2018.

These activists mainly distanced themselves from the party after its break with the Salafi movements and the alliance with the secular forces linked to the old regime. Discontent has notably increased among Islamist activists, following the party's new policy of compromise with secular forces and the strategy of specialization. In this regard, the associative field has progressively emerged as an alternative political arena defending Islamic principles and practices, seen as gradually abandoned by the party. Interviews show the rise of Islamic activists' narratives of a "betrayed revolution", [30] characterized by attacks against the state and Ennahda itself, considered by several among them to be part of the "corrupted establishment disconnected from real society":

> The party is now playing 'professional' politics, negotiating compromises with the old regime. Because of its compromise with the old regime, the party has distanced itself from the Tunisian people and the values of Islam. I prefer to focus on real things, like getting involved in civil society, in the name of God.31

The so-called Jaouadi affair is an emblematic example of this new trend. During the government's campaign against unofficial imams in the framework of the "war against terrorism", launched in 2015, the imam Ridha Jaouadi was dismissed by the government with the official accusation of "inciting radicalization"[32]. The exclusion of the young sheiks and imams acclaimed after the revolution represents the start of a new phase, in which the party leadership has taken significant decisions. Jaouadi's replacement is an imam chosen by the Minister of Religious Affairs. The Lakhmi association, of which Jaouedi is the president, launched a protest campaign against the 'government of compromise', of which Ennahda is a part, and accuses it of having violated freedom of worship. The mobilization of the Sfaxian Islamic community in support of the Imam Jaouadi has brought back to light the claims against a 'State Islam', a system of state religious control in place during Ben Ali's regime. As one exponent of the protest put it, "the imams must be chosen by the Tunisian people, not by the state or party officials, as happened during the authoritarian regime" […], "we must resist state's repression" […], "Ennahda has become like the RCD".[33]

In this context, some activists engaged in the associative sector seized the opportunity to recombine the link between the political and the religious dimensions, a core nexus eventually dropped out by the party's agenda. As stated by the imam Ridha Jouadi: "da'wa is the true politics, and it must be built from the grassroots, not from bourgeois parties, like Ennahda".[34] From this perspective, several activists engaged in the associative sector conceive their social engagement as the purest (political) form of Islamic activism (when religion and politics are two intertwined parts of the same unity), in so doing following the logic of reconfiguration of a unified Islamic arena outside the party.

Recently, several activists stemming from this milieu joined a new political platform, Itilaf al-Karama (the Coalition of Dignity), which positioned as the country's fourth political actor at the legislative elections in October 2019. Interestingly, the Coalition does not have an official religious orientation and it gathers a heterogeneous group of activists with a variegated

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[30] Statements retrieved from activists' Facebook and Twitter profiles.

[31] Author's interview, Tunis, July 2019.

[32] See http://kapitalis.com/tunisie/2015/09/15/mosquee-sidi-lakhmi-de-sfax-limogeage-de-limam-radical-ridha-jaouadi/

[33] Author's interview extracts, Sfax May 2016. See also: http://kapitalis.com/tunisie/2015/11/06/sfax-un-syndicat-islamiste-appelle-a-manifester/

[34] Facebook page and twitter profile of the imam Ridha Jaouadi.

background.35   Several among them stem from the associative field mentioned above. Interestingly, a considerable number of Coalition members took part in the demonstrations supporting the Ennahda party in the 2012-2013 mobilizations, however, after the party's pragmatic turn, they decided to join a political alternative.

During the electoral campaign, the Coalition presented itself as a disruptive political force, which strongly criticized the compromise between the Islamist party and old regime, "an elitist agreement established at the expenses of the revolutionary principles"36. In doing so, the Coalition adopted radical registers against the "corrupted establishment", defined as " the people who now rule Tunisia, the true terrorists who kill the Tunisian people with their corrupted policies".37 As stated by some Ennahda activists who joined the Coalition: "I could not stand a compromise with those who tortured my family"; "Ennahda made alliances with the old regime, I can't forgive the party for this choice"; "I joined Itilaf Karama because I want to recover my dignity as an Islamic activist".38

Despite its non-religious character, the Coalition presented itself as a conservative force seeking to restore the traditional values and institutions neglected by the old regime in the framework of the national reforms inspired by a Western model of modern state, the latter not sufficiently rejected by the Ennahda party once in power. However, the Coalition's main mission is to fulfill the unaccomplished goals of the revolution, first and foremost socio-economic justice, not to pursue an Islamist agenda (Blanc and Sigillò 2019). In this regard, this third trajectory of Islamist activists also represents a hybrid form of Islamic activism.

Conclusion

The goal of this article has been to shed light on the forms of Islamist engagement outside party politics. The use of a relational approach allowed us to study the micro-interactions occurring among different actors that, in most of the literature, are studied as a single block. Notably, the analysis has focused on the evolution of the relational dynamics between the Islamist party and the religious associative sector from the fall of the authoritarian regime to the most recent legislative elections in October 2019. The interactionist orientation adopted in this article has revealed the agency of the Tunisian Islamic associative sector, by highlighting the variety of choices that associative players can strategically (or not) make in a context of socio-political transformation. The findings presented have demonstrated that the interactions between the party and the religious associations are far from being strategically structured.

As shown in the article, the modes of action of associations may depend on logics that differ considerably from the party's political agenda. Indeed, external dynamics of tension can exist among activists who perceive themselves as part of an Islamic constellation in which the reference Islamist party is just one of the components. If, after the revolution, religious associations developed as a social force close to Ennahda, after the critical juncture of 2013 they have gradually taken an ambivalent stand towards the party. The research reported on here outlines three different trajectories of Islamic associations that have emerged in recent years and reveals some broader implications for an understanding of the evolution of Tunisian Islamic activism.

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35 The Coalition comprises a wide array of diverse forces: Salafi actors, former members of Congress for the Republic (CPR) party, former members of Ennahda, remnants of the dissolved Leagues for the Protection of the Revolution (LPR), independent journalists and bloggers, and independent preachers.

36 Author's interview with a member of Itilaf Karama, October 2019.

37 Author's interview with former Ennahda activists who joined Itilaf Karama, Tunis, October 2019.

38 Author's interview with a former member of Ennahda who joined the Coalition, Tunis, October 2019.

The first trajectory is a process of professionalization, according to which part of the associative sphere claims its autonomy from the political sphere. Over the last few years, some associations, such as religious-based charities, have undergone a process of sectorialization in parallel to the Ennahda's specialization, which has led them to reshape their relationships with the state and with politics. As I have shown, after the political turnout of 2013, some associations have faced new dilemmas linked to a need to legitimize themselves vis-à-vis the State and Western donors. Several among them have established stable subsidiary relations with public authorities. This evolution has undoubtedly had some consequences, as Islamic activism has been progressively framed on the basis of activity and manifestly not on the basis of political ideology.

The second trajectory pertains to a division of competences with the party in light of the specialization process. In this respect, findings presented have highlighted a shift from party politics to civil society, in line with a logic of complementarity. In other words, religious associations have proved to be the sphere of activation of Islamic values, officially abandoned by Ennahda as part of a specialization process, according to a strategy of pluralization of Islamic activism after the political crisis of 2013, when Ennahda risked being eradicated in the political sphere by secular forces. The analysis of the August 2018 mobilizations has shown how associations autonomously supported Ennahda's political stands from below, acting as safekeepers of Islamic values against the country's secular forces. Interestingly, in this political conjuncture, unlike in 2012-2013, these mobilizations were labeled as occurring in the civil society sphere, for the sake of legitimacy of both the party and Islamic activists engaged in the associative field.

Finally, this research sheds light on a third trajectory. A significant number of Islamic activists engaged in the civil society sphere 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 Ennahda's specialization as a betrayal. Consequently, they left the party and adopted a confrontational position towards it by developing narratives of resistance towards Ennahda's attempts to restore a regime of institutionalized Islam under state control and mobilizing against secular forces and their international allies. Recent protests for the defense of Islamic values and the creation of a new list for the last elections indicate a rapprochement between the Salafist currents, excluded by the political sphere in 2013, and former Ennahda activists, stemming from a joint mobilization within the associative sphere. Also, data showed that associations mobilized according to a logic of network reconfiguration that challenged the party to the point of joining a political alternative.

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