HOW TUNISIA'S EN-NAHDA CRAFTS ISLAMIST POLITICS

FROM PROGRAMMATIC FAILURE TO NEO-ISLAMIST FRAMING

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En-Nahda's participation in Tunisia's post-revolutionary politics triggered an adaptive process, reflecting a transition from theoretical elaborations to political practice. Switching from clandestine regime opposition to engagement in an emerging pluralistic system also puts to the test the grand narrative that defines the movement's rationale and intends to captivate the party's potential constituency.

After five years in the game, assuming a tainted Islamist label and somehow acknowledging programmatic failure, the party's leadership proposed a neo-Islamist framing, 'Muslim democracy', in 2016. This semantic operation aims to fuse two schools of thought, a confessional and a political one, with historically distinct governance systems and political cultures.

Hence, despite this twist in rhetoric, a major challenge for En-Nahda remains the reconciliation of its utilitarian take on democratic procedures with its deep-rooted reference to Islamic principles. Yet while continuing to stress its readiness for concessions, supposedly in order to save Tunisia's democratic transition, En-Nahda's political programme, practice and narrative remain flawed, fluid and unconvincing respectively, eroding its credibility and incrementally reducing its mobilisation capacity.

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INTRODUCTION: EN-NAHDA'S 'MAKE ISLAM GREAT AGAIN' MOMENT

Since its inception, the political party En-Nahda[1] has been aiming to implement a socio-political project of re-Islamisation and desecularisation. The party originally emerged from the MTI (*Mouvement à tendence islamique*, Islamic Tendency Movement), an underground organisation from the intellectual spectrum of the Muslim Brotherhood. Its legalised status after President Ben Ali's overthrow in 2011 opened up entirely new opportunities for political participation and co-determination on the national Tunisian level. This situation was also due to the proselytising of the previous decades as well as the countrywide development of clandestine organisational structures. However, their actions in the political field, marked by striking strategic restraint from a dogmatic perspective, have increasingly led the party into rough waters. Therefore, the question arises as to whether En-Nahda is on the way to providing a textbook case of the programmatic and practical failure of political Islam.[2]

The participation of political movements in transitions towards pluralism and democracy is marked by three stepping stones. First, exposure to a competitive electoral market, which requires programmatic positioning in order to reach out to the electorate. Second, in a post-authoritarian setting, entering the state's institutions hitherto under relatively strict monolithic political control. Third, facing the reality and constraints of day-to-day politics, be they legislation or the responsibility of executive power. In the Tunisian context, it is worth highlighting that a broad band of opposition parties had been able to set the framework for a consensual approach, aimed at overcoming the dictatorship of Ben Ali, in the years before his fall.[3] This setting, informed by relative mutual trust and a shared goal, enabled the post-authoritarian actors, including previous regime opponents, to engage in non-confrontational politics. However, recurring cleavages demonstrate the lack of principled mutual acceptance,[4] beyond the operative logic of consensual democracy.

At the same time, the previous authoritarian setting did not provide room for the political education of the electorate, nor enable flourishing parliamentarism. Yet Tunisia's political culture is marked by three characteristic features: a tradition of constitutionalism since the mid-19th century, post-independence non-military authoritarianism, and strong sovereignty marked by low levels of external, geostrategic interference.[5] Furthermore, the post-revolutionary environment, still part of the picture, is defined by a wide range of expectations and demands, with a salient material component.

In addition to the operational and social environment of political parties in transformation processes, the question arises – especially for organisations that rely on Islam to legitimise their activities – of how the confessional field is composed and who dominates the religious discourse.[6] In Tunisia, the two traditional centres of the organised Sunni religious establishment, Kairouan and the Zaytuna Mosque in Tunis, remain partly ambivalent towards the Islamists.[7] The post-independence leader, Habib Bourguiba, despite his substantial secularisation agenda, also resorted to Islamic terminology to justify his political office (e.g. *mujtahid*, interpreter of Islamic law) and to avoid alienating popular sentiment.[8] Notwithstanding this, his religious policies followed a secularising logic, disempowering and materially weakening traditional Islamic institutions,[9] enabling the state to monopolise power and Bourguiba himself to exert formal centralised authority. Hence, it is crucial for Islamist organisations

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1   The linguistic rendering of the organisation's Arabic name is Al-Nahdha. On the other hand, the brand name *Ennahda* is part and parcel of the political marketing. Therefore, the author has chosen a compromise, close enough to the North-African dialect, while sufficiently detached form the party's public relations: En-Nahda.

2   This analysis has been inspired by the concept originally presented by Olivier Roy in 1992, emphasising Islamist parties' lack of capacity to implement Islamic policies properly.

3   Cf. Monika Marks (2018) on the October 2005 collective. Noteworthy in this context is also the ensuing campaign by Leftists and secularists against 'dialogue', but for 'debate' with the Islamists.

4   See the fall-out between party leaders Es-Sebsi vs Ghannouchi in 2018, and the current tensions with President Kais Saied.

5   The only exception was the period when the PLO leadership resided in exile in Tunis and Israel resorted to military action on its soil.

6   For a detailed account of 'religious metamorphosis' in North Africa in general, see Haddad (2015).

7   Kairouan has developed into a Salafist stronghold, whereas Zaytuna probably regards the Islamists as a pathway to renewed societal relevance, explaining a cooperative stance.

8   The post-independence constitution (1959) defined Islam as the republic's religion – in continuation of the French protectorate's approach to identifying the autochthonous population with the creed of its majority. Cf. Riedel (2017), p. 27.

9   Bourguiba incorporated the properties of the religious foundations into state ownership and control.

to re-Islamise state institutions,[10] although their relationship with the traditional Islamic institutions remains tense, at least as long as they do not co-operate.

The tentative transformation of the Islamic belief system, or deduction therefrom into an ideology, is a recent phenomenon in Islamic history, often taking the form of political parties and mass movements.[11] Furthermore, it obviously remains an open-ended process, particularly if devoid of systemic coercive means (like in Iran or Turkey), clear majorities, and foreign policy theatres, and when exposed to the competitive tensions of a pluralistic political and religious marketplace.

En-Nahda's ideological basis is the derivation of a political project from the Islamic belief system. Hence the core argument of its leader, Rashid Ghannouchi, "Islam is born political".[12] However, this point of view merely represents an interpretation of Islamic history and does not allow a logical conclusion justifying a majority-oriented, 'republican' movement like En-Nahda. On this very basis, it could equally be argued that a monarchical, dynastic variant of political Islam should be established as a governance model.[13] Facing this systemic dogmatic flaw, Tunisia is also characterised by a progressive school of thought in Islam, which has systematically provided critical evidence that the need for political projects in Islam cannot be inferred from the textual sources.[14]

A central feature of modern Islamic political thought is not the re-enactment of a traditional Sunni version of governance, nor a contemporary re-founding of an Islamic state. Their anti-institutional stance even tends to put them at odds with the traditional religious establishment. Rather, the observed tendency is to Islamise the institutions they are faced with, at least rhetorically to express their claim, especially if acting from a non-hegemonic position.[15] Furthermore, equally a hallmark of contemporary Islamists, En-Nahda has embraced a nationalist discourse, with a tendency to appropriate and Islamise Tunisian national belonging.[16] In one sense, this represents a nationalisation of the pan-Islamic narrative by merging nationalism with religious sentiment. In the words of party leader Rachid Ghannouchi: "Ennahda [...] is the backbone of Tunisian patriotism."[17]

In the Tunisian context, a North-African country with an established history of progressive women's rights and secularising tendencies, it might appear as an anachronism, and counterintuitive, to establish a political platform that mobilises voters on nothing but attributive ethno-religious affiliation. Yet the original mobilisation power of the movement after 2011, based on an Arab-Islamic identity, painted a different picture, at least in the early, post-revolutionary phase, when En-Nahda's failure had not become clearly apparent. A long series of performance failures, however, compelled the movement in the ensuing years to redefine its place in the political spectrum, eventually leading to a neo-Islamist positioning.

ISLAMIC AWAKENING: WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Contemporary political activism in Sunni Islam is conceived of as collective action to influence and lead the polity as a whole towards an Islamic ideal, acting both on the societal level as well as concerning governance, namely the exercise of executive power. An idiosyncratic yet unspecified merger of spiritual and political activities,[18] it aims at building an Islamic utopia, or rather a retrotopian project.[19] In the realm of politicised Islam, hierarchical movements aim at realising this task.[20] In practice, it corresponds to carrying out *da'wa* (proselytising activities with the purpose of re-conversion but also as a tool for political propaganda for the movement proper) and party politics as a chosen means of acceding to power via the popular vote.[21]

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10   Cf. Somer (2017).

11   Cf. Ghalioun (1997). Bourhan Ghalioun conceives of this peculiar movement, among a set of other elements, as an expression of a quest for identity, authenticity and religious values (pp. 8/9). However, the necessity to base Islamist politics on virtuous individuals implies state control of this virtue, which is the reason why the project carries a repressive (p. 239), virtually totalitarian strain.

12   "[l]'islam est né politique." In: *Au sujet de l'islam* (2015), p. 99.

13   The author of this study differentiates between two major strands of Sunni political Islam or Islamism: a monarchical and a republican type. The Iranian, Shia model of Islamic rule (*velayat-e faqih*), although a major source of inspiration for Sunni Islamist movements such as En-Nahda, represents a distinct model, combining electoral (majoritarian) and theocratic (absolutist) elements in a unique, illiberal manner.

14   See Charfi (2010), pp. 221–268, as well as his seminal monograph 'L'islam entre le message et l'histoire' (Islam between message and history) (2004).

15   The example of the 'principles of Sharia law' (*maqasid al-sharia*) will be referred to below.

16   See Hashmi (2009). According to the author, a logical implication of the Islamic fundamentalists' embrace of the nation-state as an operative framework is their goal to seize the state for their purposes.

17   "Ennahda [...] elle est la colonne vértébrale du patriotisme Tunisien". In: *Au sujet de l'islam* (2015), p. 137.

18   Zeghal (2003) argues that the Islamist dogma wants to inverse the century-old paradigm of the Muslim world by seeking to establish a hierarchy where religion presides over politics – a process they refer to as 'justice'.

19   In *Retrotopia* (2018), Zygmunt Bauman reflects on the role of nostalgia for political action.

20   Besides the *appearance* of earlier fundamentalist movements such as the Wahhabiyya (KSA), the Sanussiyya (Libya) or the Mahdiyya (Sudan), the contemporary transposition of purported political origins of Islam into a tool for regime opposition is linked to the control of post-independence nation-states by supposedly non-Islamic governments – at least in the Islamist narrative. See Haddad (2015), p. 9.

21   There's a rich body of literature on the relationship between Islam and politics. For instance, see Asad (2003), An-Naim (2008), Charfi (2010), Ghalioun (1997), Mernissi (2002), Redissi (2017), Roy (2015) and Zeghal (2003).

Yearning for Islamic civilisation

In the Tunisian context, the message of the Islamic movement is well captured in the name the organisation chose in the late 1980s, when tentatively entering the political landscape. En-Nahda, short for *En-Nahda al-Islamiyya* (The Islamic Awakening), suggests it is a revivalist movement, but a revisionist one with the aim of re-establishing an old order.[22] While this chosen designation encapsulates the grand narrative of the organisation, it is also an ideological counterproject to the *Nahda* of the 19th century, an intellectual current of the Levant, which regarded itself as an oriental renaissance inspired by Europe's modernity.[23] From this angle, the Tunisian Islamist movement appropriates this established term of Arab intellectual history and provides it with a new – albeit distinctly Islamic – flavour.

This appropriation of pre-existing intellectual and material structures by the Islamic movement also concerns its approach to the nation-state. As the Islamic movements have come to terms with the existence of the nation-state,[24] the logical implication is to provide its characteristic elements with Islamic features. This relates to features like citizenship, but also to the political system proper. Hence, the Islamisation of political concepts eventually results in rhetorical constructions such as 'Muslim democracy', the last logical step in this process of appropriation.

In practice, also after the 2011 revolution, Islamic political entrepreneurs such as En-Nahda operate in contexts marked by strong secularised continuities. Islamic courts were abolished in 1956, the previously confessional family and inheritance laws were reformed, and President Bourguiba set up strong state control of the religious sphere, confiscating the entire property of Islamic foundations.[25] These activities triggered an organised Islamic reaction, inspired in particular by the takeover of Khomeini and the mollahs in Iran in 1979, seeking an Islamic revival in both society and politics.[26]

Particularly striking against this background, however, is the fact that even the movement's thinkers have not presented a sophisticated concept of a genuine Islamic form of government.[27] Rather, the founder of the movement has addressed issues such as

participation in 'non-Islamic' forms of government in much detail,[28] the relationship between Islam and the state, as well as secularism. His most recent writings, on the other hand, are more akin to pamphlets that try to capture the general features of the Tunisian political transformation process (such as the transideological consensus among involved players) and reclaim them exclusively for En-Nahda, in order to derive characteristics of the organisation as a whole.[29] Although obviously propagandistic, this 'willingness to concede' has become a staple trope of its discourse.

Both Malika Zeghal and Yadh Ben Achour conclude that the organisation does not have a sophisticated theoretical construct, and nor has it developed a comprehensible political theory. Rather, it seems to be based on partly implicit assumptions and acting in contextual terms.[30] For example, a commitment to democracy is deducted from participation in a pluralistic transformation process, yet not built on a principled support of liberal democracy.[31]

In Ghannouchi's writings, however, some principles crystallise that are considered political guidelines. One crucial principle is a strikingly anti-secular position, primarily based on the – polemical – equating of authoritarianism and secularism with anti-religious hostility.[32] Another is the primacy of the religious realm per se over both state control and non-metaphysical, positivist legislation.[33] Yet another, building on the first two, as well as the arbitrary equating of Islam with Islamism, is the cultivation of a victimhood myth. Furthermore, to end the undesirable situation of the dominance of a secular state, Ghannouchi introduces certain methods. These are mainly referred to as *ikhtirâq* and *tatbiq islami.*[34] In his view, their application should enable the existing hierarchy to be turned upside down, and the establishment, or rather the re-establishment, of the supremacy of all things Islamic. In thinking militant circles, the works of Ali Shariati and Malek Bennebi were equally at a premium.[35]

22 Lapidus (1992) discusses the contemporary and historical paradigms in detail.

23 Cf. Albert Hourani (2001), *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age: 1798–1939.*

24 See Hashmi, op. cit.

25 See Bessis & Belhassen (2012).

26 Riedel (2017), p. 28.

27 Cf. Zeghal (2013).

28 See Ghannouchi (1998) in Kurzman (Ed.) *Liberal Islam*, pp. 89–95.

29 Such strongly propagandistic positions and even less concisely oriented publications can be found in Stepan (2018), *Foreign Affairs* (2016) or *Au sujet de l'islam* (2015).

30 Zeghal (2013), pp. 11–12 & 20.

31 Redissi (2017), p. 11. "[Islamism] arranges itself with secular institutions […]", author's translation.

32 "The state turned itself toward the West, the people toward the East", *Au sujet de l'islam* (2015), p. 132 (author's translation).

33 "If society is imbued with religious values … the law will eventually translate this naturally" (author's translation and emphasis added). *Au sujet de l'islam* (2015), p. 29.

34 (Islamic) 'penetration' (of modernity) and 'Islamic implementation', respectively. Zeghal (2013), pp. 15–16.

35 Interview with Amel Azzouz (autumn 2018). Note: Iranian and Algerian 20th century thinkers, writing about Islamic political philosophy and the restoration of former Islamic magnificence, respectively.

Features of an emerging narrative

On the basis of these conceptual and terminological considerations, a binding narrative of this ideological, religiously inspired mass movement has emerged. This has been achieved by dealing with contemporary Islamist thinkers, as well as the experience of brutal repression – nonetheless shared with other political opponents. The following characteristics can be identified as its main components.

First, the proposed normative Islamic framework implies a strong revisionist character. It does not accept the status quo of the political and governance system of the post-independence state, seeking to inverse the established legal order and hierarchy and to establish Islamic supremacy in political and societal matters.[36] However, the framework lacks a doctrinarian character due to conceptual paucity, and is absent an elaboration of a distinct theoretical governance model. As the movement's thinkers have not put forward an Islamic political theory that could be implemented to govern Tunisia in the 21st century, they are left with two options: underscoring their reactionary orientation, by demanding the introduction of (unspecified) Sharia law, blasphemy laws, or by downplaying FGM,[37] while working to re-Islamise the remaining, post-revolutionary shell of the state.

Second, the movement's leaders embrace a populist discourse, using either verbiage, such as 'justice' and 'freedom', or finger-pointing at the old elite and the 'deep state'.[38] Following a truly demagogic logic, this discourse culminates in underlining their victimhood. It is leveraging a past of political exclusion and physical oppression (shared with other political opponents) to create the semblance of special legitimacy.

Third, a central feature of En-Nahda's narrative is identitarian. The party portrays itself as the sole, 'true' embodiment of Tunisia's 'authentic' cultural heritage, historically a strong blend of Arab ethnicity and Sunni Islam,[39] yet relatively more complex in the 21st century. This strong focus on identity markers is the classic landmark and mobilising element of populist politics, as they supposedly produce political legitimation by simple referral.[40] However, such a logic not only relies

on an assumed societal identity consensus, it equally tries to shape a compulsive narrative of national and religious belonging.[41] Yet in practice, it only produces a closed hermeneutic circle,[42] unable to put forward programmatic choices with regard to questions of economic or social policy. Accordingly, even though this identification of a doctrinaire type successfully serves as a lever of mobilisation, the inability to deduce fitting programmatic choices corresponds to a structural failure of the movement.

En-Nahda's politics of emotions

With the Arab uprisings, the circumstances for Islamic movements experienced a fundamental shift, allowing unrestrained participation in pluralist environments. By transforming into political parties, organisations such as En-Nahda became exposed to the logic of a competitive marketplace. Initially, their normative anti-secularism, peppered with populist messaging and identitarian discourse, successfully curried favour with large parts of the electorate.

Yet despite the cultivation of a consensual trope, the political platform and its related organisation antagonised wide circles of the polity, including its opponents, during its first mandate until the Troika's resignation.[43] For instance, using his office for ultratraditionalist, truly reactionary policies, Noureddine el-Khademi, Minister of Religious Affairs, pushed the systematic Salafisation of mosques.[44] When taking a closer look at the founder's writings, such decisions do not come as a surprise. In his 2011 monograph, *The Islamic Movement in Tunisia*, Ghannouchi makes ample reference to Salafism and the Muslim brotherhood's political and social thought as guiding principles.[45]

Nevertheless, despite the advantages of mass mobilisation capacities, participation in post-revolutionary legalisation and a pluralist, comparatively fragmented opposition, En-Nahda's Islamist conception of representative power was nevertheless constantly put to the test, crystallising further elements of structural and programmatic failure.

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36   See footnote 33.

37   En-Nahda party member Habib Ellouze has become notorious for his comments on female genital mutilation (FGM).

38   Signifying the state's security agencies, formerly used to repress the movement during its pre-legalisation phase and the old elites with vested material interests.

39   Shiism and Ibadism have both been elements of the country's Islamic history, whereas the original Berber communities were incrementally absorbed into the hegemonic Arab ethnicity.

40   Ghannouchi portrays himself as the champion of Arab-Islamic identity, which, in his view commands respect. See his respective comments in *Au sujet de l'islam* (2015), pp. 132-136.

41   Peter Sloterdijk (2013) discusses this theme as a 'total belonging' of collectivities.

42   À la "You are Tunisian, i.e. Arab and Muslim. We are the party that represents this identity. Thus you have to vote for us, so we make sure your identity will be truly represented".

43   Name given to the first tri-partite post-revolutionary coalition that stepped down in 2013. See Wolf (2017), pp. 152-156.

44   Riedel (2017), p. 29.

45   *Al-haraka al-islamiyya* (2011), particularly section 3, pp. 73-85.

POST-2011 REALITY CHECK: FROM CLANDESTINE MOVEMENT TO PARTY POLITICS

Following the legalisation of the party in March 2011, a test of faith for the organisation took hold. Suddenly, its conceptual elaborations and terminological reflections – in sum, abstract assumptions and rhetorical representations – were exposed to the harsh reality of policymaking, popular expectations and post-revolutionary demands. During the upheaval proper, the organisation had remained entirely invisible – a level of strategic restraint that will become even more conspicuous and systemic during the political transition. Yet in a statement that reveals a certain amount of cognitive dissonance, Rachid Ghannouchi maintains that the uprising has in fact been akin to an Islamic revolution.[46] Furthermore, in order to justify policy decisions unpopular with its constituency, the leader of the movement increasingly resorts to formulations that conjure up Islamic principles or that were supposedly taken in the spirit of the creed. This level of abstraction is most probably due to a number of factors, including a prioritisation of theory over practice, lengthy stays in exile leading to detachment and, ultimately, a lack of practical political vision.

Even though the transformative process brought about new institutions, elements of the old political culture persist. These include members of the former regime party, who remain significant players.[47] In this fluid context, En-Nahda's political communication focuses on the trope of consensual politics and its willingness to compromise.[48] However, compromise can only occur between two parties. Hence, the constant rehashing of this theme boils down to an appropriation of this stance, leveraged for image and legitimacy purposes. At the same time, a condescending tone appears in Ghannouchi's speech, verbalised as the acceptance of various outcomes. This posture reinforces the impression that, with hindsight, En-Nahda's own positions are rationalised within the framework of consensus.[49]

Apart from the tactical avoidance of a hegemonic position in the new political system, particularly in its governments, which would certainly have led to a potentially dangerous intensification of polarisation, there is also the question of the ability to bear government responsibility. Does the movement's apparatus have anywhere near the technical capabilities to carry out the day-to-day political business, namely executive responsibility? Could sufficient allegiance be established in the ministries to implement potentially controversial regulations? What were the results of En-Nahda's participation in the post-revolutionary governments?

Choices that were regularly portrayed as a compromise were, in most cases, a simple over-voting by other political actors, be it in debates around the constitution or in the framework of regular legislation in parliament. The fact that the movement had to acknowledge defeat on substantive matters, despite an electoral majority, triggered an ex-post rationalisation process that represented these ideological setbacks as a willingness to compromise.[50]

Emerging elements of failure

Immediately after the fall of Ben Ali, En-Nahda also gained visibility when its leader, Rashid Ghannouchi, returned from exile. From then on, the Islamist organisation was involved in all decision-making processes of the political transition and participated in both the 'Supreme Council' (Arabic: *Hay'at*) under the leadership of Yadh Ben Ashur,[51] as well as the constitution drafting.[52] After the first elections in October 2011, in which En-Nahda received the most votes, it entered a coalition, dubbed Troika, together with two of its former opposition partners from the October 2005 manifesto (see footnote 3). However, actions by its government members antagonised wide circles of the Tunisian polity. In particular, the systematic Salafisation of mosques under the nahdawi Minister of Religious Affairs led to heightened tensions across the political spectrum.

Yet despite opting for a low profile and a relatively inconspicuous presence in government, the overall situation became so polarised that by mid-2013 a National Dialogue under the aegis of the so-called 'Quartet' had to mediate to ensure the continuation of the political

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46   *Au sujet de l'islam* (2015), pp. 107/108: O.R.: "But the revolutions of the Arab Spring, in Tunis [...] were not carried out in the name of religion? R.G.: Sure, they have been. We [sic] consider that Islam is the people's energy; they don't need to proclaim that" (author's translation).

47   See Boubekeur (2015).

48   A number of authors have picked up on this self-depiction, more, or less critically. See, for instance, Stepan (2018), Hamid (2016) and McCarthy (2019).

49   In the words of Hamadi Redissi (2017), p. 61: "[...] the doctrinal assembling [...] re-establishes a 'forgotten' democracy in the discursive tradition [of Islam]. More precisely, Islam reinvents an anti-authoritarian tradition and deduces therefrom that the Islamic consultation principle is an equivalent of modern democracy" (author's translation).

50   For example, Rashid Ghannouchi in *Foreign Affairs* (2016).

51   En-Nahda was represented by Noureddine B'hiri, see: https://www.tunisienumerique.com/membres-du-conseil-de-linstance-superieure-pour-la-realisation-des-objectifs-de-la-revolution-de-la-reforme-politique-et-de-la-transition-democratique/.

52   See Zemni (2015) on both the constitution-making process as well as the role of the Supreme Council (*Haute Instance*) in the early transition.

transition and to avoid civil strife.[53] Eventually, the break-up of the 'Troika' coalition was due to Salafist excesses, culminating in two political assassinations that led to nationwide demonstrations against increasing Islamisation and radicalisation.[54] Only the incremental rhetorical distancing from the Salafis as well as support for legislation against the jihadist 'Ansar al-Sharia' organisation allowed En-Nahda to remain a credible partner in the democratic transition.

In fact, the new system of 'checks and balances' compelled En-Nahda to review its original positions, not its purported readiness to compromise. Hence, what appears to be a compromise, or is propagandistically represented as such, is rather an adaptation to adverse circumstances, away from maximalist positions. Thus, the new representative system forced En-Nahda to review its radical positions and the much-praised 'moderation' did not occur of its own volition. Above all, it does not correspond to a doctrinary review but to positions that the movement had to comply with due to the overall socio-political balance of power.

In addition to exploring the possibilities in executive functions, the maximalist demands of En-Nahda reached their limits both in the drafting of the constitution and in numerous legislative proposals, incrementally denting credibility among its constituency.

First, the new constitution, adopted in January 2014, did not meet the original core demand for the introduction of Sharia law. The reference to Islam proper has been preserved, since it was already enshrined in the 1959 version. However, Islamic law, with its mainly family, inheritance and criminal *directives*, is not referred to. Nevertheless, Rashid Ghannouchi tried to sell the non-inclusion of Sharia law as a success, citing the *Maqasid Al-Shariah*, the 'intentions of Sharia', an abstract legal term in Islamic jurisprudence.[55]

In the field of parliamentary legislation, En-Nahda's positions were particularly notable in the following cases, falling short of both post-revolutionary demands directed against the ancien régime and its own Islamic posture.

In mid-2013, Ansar al-Sharia, a Salafi-jihadi militant organisation, was eventually designated by the En-Nahda-led government (Troika coalition) as a terrorist entity. Due to the previous phase of Salafi-caused unrest, culminating in the political assassinations of two

leftist politicians, En-Nahda also changed its rhetoric towards violent radicals.[56] The political calculus behind this switch was informed by electorate considerations, due to a sizable number of Salafi supporters voting for En-Nahda in 2011.[57] During the same period, En-Nahda was also in favour of introducing a blasphemy law, proposed by its hardliner Habib Ellouze, albeit to no avail.[58]

In 2014, surprisingly, En-Nahda voted against the exclusion of former RCD party (Constitutional Democratic Rally) members from running for office. While acting in defiance of the most fundamental revolutionary demands, this amnesty for ex-regime officials was informed by the logic of tapping into the surviving network of the former ruling RCD party.[59] Similarly, the vote in favour of the new, long-debated anti-terrorist law in 2015 seemed to counter demands for freedom, as it enables the state to implement harsh measures, raising the spectre of re-securitisation.[60]

This voting and decision-making behaviour indicates a clear pattern. For questions directly or indirectly related to religion (Islam, Sharia law, blasphemy, dealing with Salafists; freedom of expression) a maximalist demand is always presented initially, usually by so-called hardliners, who obviously speak on behalf of the organisation. Only when a rejection of the ideologically grounded demands becomes apparent and is clearly articulated by a range of actors (adverse media reaction, hostile majorities in parliament, criticism by extraparliamentary opposition) does the organisation tend to cave in. These adjustments to the prevailing socio-political trend are then vocally touted as a compromise, with hindsight, even though the demands themselves are still looming, but are simply not inplementable under the current circumstances. The second feature is a distancing from revolutionary demands in relation to the ancien régime. To be sure, such a stance by an Islamist organisation has various consequences. On the one hand, the party is perceived as strongly ambiguous, while, on the other hand, it faces defections both of the party youth – often to the more openly doctrinaire Salafis, though, a relatively easy posture being in the opposition – and of older comrades-in-arms.[61]

53   See Meddeb (2019), p. 7. The same Quartet was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2015.
54   Riedel (2017), p. 29.
55   See Brésillon (2018) and Rachid Ghannouchi in *Au sujet de l'islam* (2015), p. 52.

56   McCarthy (2019), p. 8.
57   Wolf (2018), p. 143.
58   McCarthy, *Protecting the Sacred* (p. 457).
59   RCD = Rassemblement Constitutionnel Démocratique. Wolf (2018), p. 553.
60   See Stahl & Treffler (2019). Tibi (2015) discusses the securitisation of Islamism more generally, particularly in view of the radical element of the Islamist project, which intends to change the political system and refashion the state.
61   Ltifi (2020).

Ikhwani no more?[62]

Due to the repeated failure of En-Nahda in day-to-day politics, the question arises as to how the Islamist movement could maintain a certain level of mobilisation power, since repeated pushbacks led to a substantial loss of credibility.[63] Effectively, the tendency towards rationalising abstractions, the ostensible willingness to reach consensus at the expense of political content, and the awkward proximity to the former RCD reveal an organisation in survival strategy mode, torn between claim and reality, incapable of implementing its core concerns through parliamentary practice. Moreover, unlike its Turkish Islamist brother organisation AKP, En-Nahda has no means of using the media-effective symbolic politics, and nor can it influence its electorate through foreign policy action, since these agendas are subject to strong presidential control.

Nevertheless, or precisely because of its practical incapability, En-Nahda decided in the summer of 2016 to act strongly at the rhetorical level, and to add a new facet to its narrative of identity, justice and victimhood. The self-referential 'Muslim Democrats', while being a neo-Islamist framing, was aimed at expressing a stage in the development of the organisation that puts it at the centre of the political spectrum.

PARTY CONGRESS, HAMMAMET 2016: PLUS ÇA CHANGE

A political project based on a belief system of universal entitlement faces numerous challenges in practice, particularly when facing the requirements of day-to-day political business – especially if devoid of a hegemonic position in the political system or when opting for strategic restraint. En-Nahda, which has created an identitarian mass movement of reactionaries cut from this project, has thus far failed to implement the fundamental core promises of its eponymous 'Islamic rebirth'. This not only entails allegiance waning in part but reveals that the rhetorical level is severely strained. At the 10th party congress in Hammamet in 2016, the movement introduced a new framing, intended to nudge the movement closer to the political centre.[64]

Since then, En-Nahda has presented itself as 'Muslim democrat', positioned at the intersection between the promises of secular salvation, post-revolutionary demands and the knack of political marketing. The main question here is whether this strategic political communication represents a flight forward or whether it is an expression of a fundamental dogmatic revision of the organisation, akin to a doctrinal development from Marxism to social democracy.[65]

The tenth party congress: post-scholastic rupture or neo-Islamist framing?

After the first five eventful years in Tunisia's transformed political system, En-Nahda has reaped the consequences of previous failures, as the movement has been unable to meet the expectations raised. By introducing a new label, En-Nahda wants to distract from the fact that it has not been able to make significant progress in the Islamisation of the political system or the state institutions. However, even with the 'Muslim democrat' designation, En-Nahda remains stuck at the level of an identitarian movement, unable to offer a genuine Islamic economic or social policy.[66] En-Nahda is duly stranded with the new terminological construction in the same field of tension between identitarian promises, flawed ideological sophistication and diminishing mobilisation power.

In 2016, during its 10th congress, Rachid Ghannouchi announced their new framing as Muslim democrats.[67] This step in political marketing was accompanied by an announcement concerning a 'specialisation', namely the intention to henceforth functionally separate the broad-based preaching activities, namely *da'wa* (proselytising), from the political activities of elected MPs and government representatives with executive powers. This separation was supposed to take place at the personal and institutional level. However, to this day, a clear-cut distinction going beyond the rhetoric, between an institutional body solely dedicated to preaching activities (akin to a Tablighi preaching movement) and one concerning itself with politics alone has not emerged. Ghannouchi remains the head

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62 *Ikhwani* (Arabic) refers to the ideological Muslim Brotherhood (Al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun) affiliation.

63 Dahmani (2016).

64 On interpretations of the congress, see Larbi (2016), Hamid (2016,) Ghannouchi (2016), and Meddeb (2019).

65 I am indebted to Professor Alaya Allani for this astute analogy. Interview, Carthage, autumn 2018.

66 Ben Salem (2020) offers insights into the party's respective policies. Intriguing from an analytical perspective remains the apparent contradiction of a movement based on collective, ethno-religious identity yet favouring an individualistic, capital-oriented economy.

67 The event attracted ample media attention and analytical comment, starting with an interview by Rashid Ghannouchi in French newspaper *Le Monde*. The party leader also had the leeway to pen his own panegyric in *Foreign Affairs* (2016), obviously from a partisan, party politics perspective.

of an umbrella organisation (Ar 'Harakat En-Nah-da', The En-Nahda Movement) with multiple functions, including its political wing. Above all, the decision-making bodies (Shura, etc) have not been separated, maintaining the structure of a single umbrella organisation with non-distinct functional branches. The only difference is that elected representatives of the movement are not allowed to engage in public preaching or to lead prayer; for example, Ghannouchi himself ostentatiously refrains from carrying out such activities as an imam.

In practice, it would be challenging to set up a distinct *da'wa* section, as many members exert their roles in personal union. Implementing specialisation would thus entail reducing certain figures to missionary or preaching activities, while limiting others to solely exerting a political function. Could one still swap functions or exert roles in sequence, however? Have the bylaws of the movement been changed to reflect the 'specialisation' announcement? According to Maryam Ben Salem,[68] a tangible result of the announced specialisation has been a change in the organisation's recruitment procedure, toning down the dogmatic requirements. However, it could equally be argued that broadening the recruitment by softening the 'Islamic' credentials corresponds with a planned move towards the centre of the political landscape, rather than with a doctrinal review proper.

A neo-Islamist paradigm

The traditional explanation for 'post-Islamism' put forward in 1996 by Asef Bayatand, as argued by Olivier Roy,[69] purports that Islamist projects have a tendency to lose momentum and appeal, and ultimately morph into what are called 'post-Islamist' organisations. However, this study indicates that an Islamist organisation like En-Nahda, operating under the systemic constraints of a pluralistic, democratising political system, fails to implement its dogmatic agenda due to opposition in the parliamentary system and society at large. Despite enjoying substantial support from the electorate, its strategic restraint in order to retain executive power led to systemic challenges against its policy proposals. Hence, assuming a supposedly fresh posture by embracing the rhetorical formula 'Muslim

democrats' also expresses the failure of its retrotopian project. Equally, rather than corresponding to a fundamental review of its doctrine that would justify the *post-* prefix, it boils down to a neo-Islamist re-positioning.[70] However, recognising its inability to Islamise the state under the current circumstances also led to an adaptive process,[71] with a still uncertain outcome for Tunisia's Islamist movement.

Yet a key motive for the declaration of the 'specialisation' (Ar *takhassus*) associated with the new framing is purely legal. The existing legal prescription even makes *takhassus* appear to be at the core of the changes that were touted at the Party Congress in Hammamet as 'Muslim democracy', in the sense of political marketing. In fact, the new constitution of 2014 prohibits the use and exploitation of mosques for political purposes.[72] Therefore, it was a compelling step for En-Nahda, in order to remain constitutionally compliant, to separate itself from the double-hatting that is often carried out, and thus to prohibit party members from simultaneously exercising a political office and ceremonial functions in worship. To be sure, the conservative Islamist positions of En-Nahda became clear in the discussion on this issue, when Habib Ellouze advocated on behalf of the party a constitutional amendment that was intended to reverse this separation between politics and religion.[73] Thus, the much-vaunted 'specialisation' corresponded with a belated re-enactment of the constitution, after attempts to adapt it to the Islamic movement's own ideological understanding had failed. Therefore, the framing as 'Muslim Democrats' resembles another ex-post rationalisation of this specific setback – even though it is not entirely devoid of potentially useful political marketing considerations.

Not only did the historical example of the AKP play a role in the development of the new label, but a German foundation based in Tunis was involved in the elaboration of the term.[74] According to the head of this conservative German organisation, German experts had been invited to present the concept of Germany's Christian Democracy.[75] Since the 2016 'Muslim Democracy' framing, there have also been regular attempts to construct an analogy with the

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68   Ben Salem (2018).

69   Roy (2015). Nevertheless, Olivier Roy, who mostly discusses the elements of failure of the Islamist political project, also insists on the possibility of branching out into a 'neo-fundamentalist' type of organisation.

70   See Mandaville (2014), who touches on the wider spectrum of Islamist activism beyond traditional forms, and Abdul Ghani (2019), who discusses the post-Islamism hypothesis as a given.

71   See Somer (2017).

72   McCarthy (2015), p. 457.

73   Ibid.

74   See Marzo (2019).

75   Interview with Ad-Daylami, Hanss Seidel Stiftung, autumn 2018, Tunis.

Christian-Democratic parties of Europe. However, to express an alleged change from a strictly dogmatic party to the political centre as a 'people's party', the analogy of social democracy would seem more appropriate. Another conceptual weakness is linked to the incongruity of the term. As every Muslim Tunisian who is supporting the democratic transition can rightfully be called a 'Muslim democrat', the general applicability of the term makes it look like a misnomer for a specific political party.

Beyond the conceptual question of the new label, however, the movement's political practice is marked by a continuation of the previous policy, in which the same patterns remain central characteristics. Following its neo-Islamist framing, En-Nahda supported the 'administrative reconciliation law' in 2017, designed to protect those out of the ranks of the former ruling RCD party accused of cronyism and corruption from prosecution.[76] After an initial rejection of the bill, En-Nahda did not want to antagonise the coalition partner (Nidaa Tunes) and agreed to it.[77] Yet the debate about the CSP (*Code du statut personnel*, Personal Status Code) and the findings of the 'Colibe' committee (Individual Freedoms and Equality Committee) in 2018 caused far greater tensions. In this debate on the question of inheritance law and women's equality, En-Nahda ultimately decided not to challenge the social acquis of women's rights by means of conservative-Islamic positions. Previously, the movement argued in this sense and took a conservative, traditionalist position. For example, on the question of the admissibility of polygamy, party leader Rashid Ghannouchi evasively replied: "This is a thorny issue [...]."[78]

At this stage, it appears that the Tunisian Islamist project embodied by En-Nahda has failed primarily because of the specific circumstances, and due to its own claims. Both are interrelated since a lack of hegemony did not enable the implementation of the core demands (with a pluralistic democracy as an obstacle) and thus the high expectations could not be met.[79] In the end, it remains to be seen whether the broad social support of the mass movement can be maintained by its ostensible movement towards the political centre, or whether its dismal overall performance will further sideline the movement despite a neo-Islamic posture.

76   See McCarthy (2019), pp. 10–11.
77   For a critical assessment of the process and its implications, see Yardimici-Geylikci/Tür (2018), pp. 7–8.
78   *Au sujet de l'islam* (2015), pp. 57/58.
79   See Kirdis (2018) on En-Nahda's non-dominance and systematic backtracking.

CONCLUSION: POLITICAL ISLAM'S TRAJECTORY FROM FAILURE TO NEO-ISLAMISM

Religious political entrepreneurs expose themselves to a daunting task. While basing their project on emotions around national belonging and spiritual affiliation, they are confronted with the practical need to go beyond mass mobilisation and create adequate solutions to the challenges facing their societies. A standard, virtually robotic formula for Islamists consists of proposing the introduction of Sharia law, even though it is concerned with only a very limited domain of the entire legal spectrum.

More importantly, because of its ideological orientation, En-Nahda positions itself at the intersection between two competitive markets: the religious (in competition for sovereignty of interpretation) and the political market (for votes). In this tense field, which has proved to be detrimental to its claims thus far, attempts have been made to re-position the organisation as a centrist party after its first five years in office by espousing a neo-Islamist framing. This corresponds, on the one hand, to accepting the impossibility of implementing excessively literalist readings of Islamic sources and, on the other, to maintaining the widest possible support among the electorate and to stopping the onset of erosion. But how far can a conservative-traditionalist, partially reactionary, certainly identitarian-populist political platform change its outlook, without losing itself and thus its followers? And how can it ensure that sufficient constituencies are tapped into for votes to match the requirements of a supposedly centrist mass party, as the neo-Islamist framing suggests?

Republican Islamism caught between expectations, conceptual flaws and narrative plausibility

Since entering the political game legally, the Islamist party En-Nahda has faced a growing balancing act between its narrative of Islamic awakening (the meaning of *Nahda*) and political practice. The main components of this narrative, in light of a critical analysis and the complex social environment, have proved to be difficult to implement and thus hardly appear plausible. Nevertheless, the principled acceptance of the account in broad circles explains the development of expectations regarding core political content, which was not subject to scrutiny before 2011, and which has not been convincingly fulfilled since then. Still, the leader

of the organisation has tried repeatedly and creatively to present the political positions and decisions as consistent with the overarching narrative, for instance by putting forward the 'principles of Sharia' vs Sharia law proper. As a result, it is understandable that there has been a sharp decline in voter support (especially during the recent presidential election), as the movement's story is no longer considered plausible.

En-Nahda's broad answer to the first five years of policy failures has been a rhetorical repositioning closer to the centre of the political spectrum. This placement may not correspond to its original ideological orientation, but is de facto reflected in its political practice, characterised by a shift away from Islamic ideals (for instance no enforcement of Sharia law, especially not in the constitution; heritage laws in favour of women retained; reliance on existing blasphemy paragraphs for legal action). However, in all cases, this occured only because of lacking majorities, and societal challenges, not due to liberal-progressive stances from the very beginning. Starting the various debates from programmatic maximalist positions, this ex-post softening of stances is usually rationalised as an ex-ante readiness to compromise.

Moreover, the attempt to reposition itself rhetorically as 'Muslim democrats' in 2016 could not corroborate the credibility of the Islamist organisation as a whole. This is probably due, on the one hand, to the fuzziness of the term, which can hardly be mobilising. On the other hand, the question also arises as to whether this political marketing is not primarily intended for the international, non-Tunisian perception of the party in order to steer it away from the environment of violent doctrinary Islamism, embodied by the militant Islamist sub-culture of Daesh (IS) or Al-Qaida.

Meanwhile, the experience of En-Nahda's dismal programmatic performance raises a number of fundamental issues. Can a party, whose high-ranking representatives are vocal in their support of FGM, the introduction of unspecified 'Sharia' legislation, and who use the victim myth to justify jihadist violence, credibly claim to be in accordance with modern, progressive values, or to be compatible with liberal democracy? Can a party from the Islamist spectrum participating in a non-Islamic form of government, namely occupying a non-hegemonic position in the political system, fulfill its own narrative and meet associated voter expectations? En-Nahda's enduring lack of implementation capability makes the situation appear less like Tunisian exceptionalism and more like a patent failure of political Islam. Above all, a neo-Islamist reorientation can hardly satisfy the ideological orientation of the organisation along non-negotiable core content lines, crucially the supposed superiority of Islamic law versus modern legal positivism. /

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