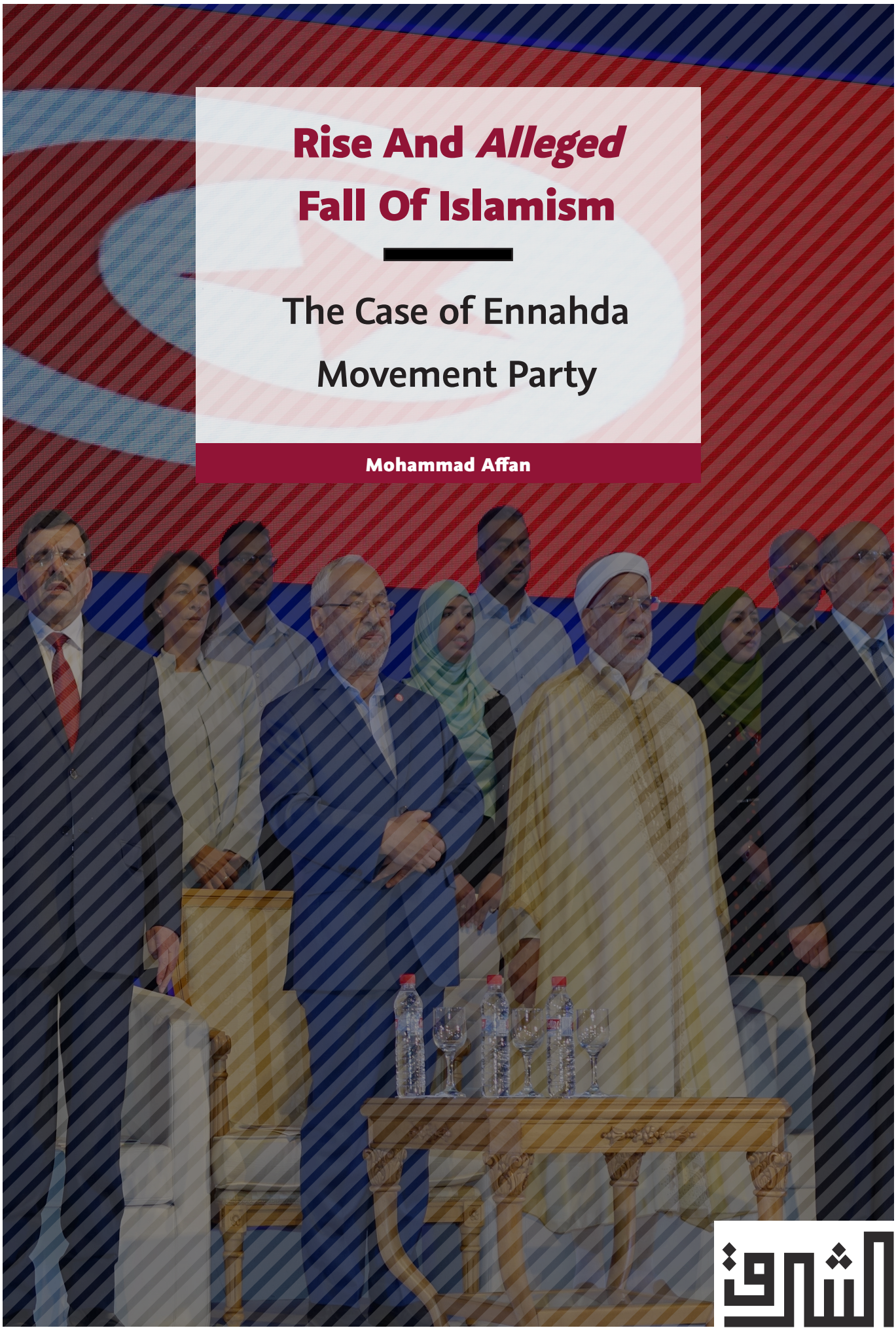
Rise And *Alleged* Fall Of Islamism

The Case of Ennahda Movement Party

Mohammad Affan



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Abstract: At its tenth national con¬gress, Ennahda Movement Party declared that it will separate politics from preaching and transform itself into a nation¬al democratic party. This decision was perceived as an indication of the downfall of Islamism. However, tracing the ideological and organizational evolution of the Tunisian Islamist movement shows that it is highly dynamic and adaptable. Therefore, the latest developments should be perceived as a new metamorphosis of Islamism and an organizational remodeling of its movement in response to the opportunities and challenges it has faced since the Arab Spring.

Key words: Islamism, Ennahda Movement Party, Political Islam, Muslim Brotherhood.

Introduction

'Islamism is Dead! Long live Muslim democrats';[1] 'Ennahda out of political Islam';[2] 'From Political Islam to Muslim Democracy'.[3] With these dramatic headlines, various international news agencies covered the tenth national congress of the Ennahda Movement Party, EMP, which was held on May 20, 2016. In his keynote speech, Rashid al-Ghannoushi – the founder, main ideologue, and current president of the movement summarized the evolution of the Tunisian Islamist movement in three successive phases:

Ennahda has evolved since the 70s from an ideological movement engaged in the struggle for identity, to a comprehensive protest movement against an authoritarian regime, to a national democratic party devoted to reform.[4]

At this congress, the movement's leader announced what has been described as an ideological shift or rebranding of the movement by deciding to separate the political from the preaching and to transform the EMP into an ordinary 'national democratic party'.[5]

This historic decision is considered by al-Ghannoushi to be a sign of 'maturity'[6]. On the other hand, it has unleashed a harsh storm of criticism, with party leaders accused of betraying their history and beliefs and of making shameful concessions to satisfy the Tunisian secularists and international powers.[7]

The aim of this paper is to trace the ideological transformations in the long path of the Tunisian Islamist movement from the 1970s to the present and to examine the contexts and the underlying factors that catalyzed these transformations up until the abandonment of the Islamist ideology. Yet, before proceeding, it is important to explore the origin of Islamism and how it reacted to the existential challenges Islam was facing in the mid-nineteenth century.

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Islam in the Modern Era

Islamism is defined simply as 'political activity and popular mobilization in the name of Islam'.[8] It is usually seen as a response of the pious or committed Muslims to the challenge of traditional societies decadence and their invasion by modernity.

Indeed, the relationship between Islamism and modernity is somewhat complicated. It has been argued that Islamism is a conservative reaction to and a rebellion against modernity. Although traditional Muslims accepted the material and technical aspect of modernity, they refused its way of thinking, as they believed that the relativism of modernity negatively affects the morality and the traditional values of Muslim communities.[9]

On the other hand, Islamism itself is a modern phenomenon. Islamists are 'as much products of modernity as they are reactions to it'.[10] Islamists, while attempting to resist modernity and to build an authentic Islamic theory for a new way of life, have borrowed many modern Western ideas and methods concerning political and social organization as well as mobilization.[11] Therefore, instead of establishing a new scholastic tradition or a creed sect, Islamists established social movements and political parties, which propagated political ideologies rather than religious doctrines.

Islamism is not only a modern phenomenon, but it could also be considered a modernizing agent. It did not only get the benefit of the modern transformation of traditional Muslim societies, but it also helped in the entrenchment of such transformations. For instance, thanks to the emergence of the modern form of political activism (i.e., modern political organizations, modern politicians and intellectuals, and modern public space and mass media), the Islamist movements became able to detach members of traditional societies from their traditional ties (to the tribes or sects) and recruit them to adhere to a new system of ideas and be a member in their social movements.[12]

Islamism itself is a modern phenomenon. Islamists are 'as much products of modernity as they are reactions to it'

Another feature of modernity that had a great impact on the emergence of Islamism is the print revolution and mass literacy, which rendered the fundamental Islamic texts available for increasing masses in Muslim societies. In traditional Muslim societies, scholars, 'ulamā', were the sole interpreters of Islam. Yet, after colonial domination, the traditional Islamic establishments were accused by both secularists and Islamic revivalists of preaching a 'fossilized' form of Islam. Both factors (print revolution and mass literacy, and recession of the religious role of traditional scholars) allowed religiously inclined individuals, usually educated in non-religious institutions and engaged in secular professions, to practice their right to interpret the religious scriptures in their own way. Those Islamic 'thinkers or intellectuals' challenged the religious authority of the traditional scholars, and succeeded in gaining popularity for their Islamist ideology.[13]

Comprehensive Islam, Comprehensive Islamic Movements

While resisting the values of Westernization and modernity, including secularization or social division of labor, Islamist movements emphasized the Islamic reference of the whole social realm through adopting the concept of 'comprehensive Islam' – the concept which may necessitate 'leviathanian' or even totalitarian model of Shari'ah governance. Moreover, the Islamist movements themselves were designed based on such a 'comprehensiveness' model, in which preaching, charity, educational, and political activities go hand in hand.

Some might argue that the problematic relationship between politics and religion or the dichotomy between the political and preaching in the context of Islamic movements can be explained by the political nature of Islam. It is commonly argued that Islam is 'a political religion par excellence'[14] because it was born as a political and religious community, as simultaneously a sect and society.[15] However, the political-preaching dilemma – in my contention – is a modern phenomenon related to the emergence of the contemporary Islamist movement. The origin of this problematic relationship is pinpointed by Hassan al-Banna's characteristic definition of the Islamic comprehensiveness – a definition he elaborately laid out in one of his most famous quotes:

Islam is a comprehensive system that addresses all aspects of life. It is state and homeland, government and nation. It is morals and power, mercy and justice. It is culture and law, science and judiciary. It is material and fortune, gain and richness. It is jihad (holy war) and da'wa (calling), army and idea. It is all of that as it is true creed and correct worship, without distinction.[16]

What is confusing in this definition is not only the obvious overstretching of the

religious sphere and the sanctification of common social structures and practices, but also how al-Banna adopted a comprehensive movement style to embody the concept of comprehensive Islam. He defined the Muslim Brotherhood to be a Salafi call, a Sunni way, a Sufi truth, a political organization, an athletic group, a cultural and scientific association, an economic company, and a social idea.[17]

Clearly, al-Banna was greatly influenced by utopian political ideologies and their totalitarian models for social organization, which were very fashionable during the 1930s and 1940s

Clearly, al-Banna was greatly influenced by utopian political ideologies and their totalitarian models for social organization, which were very fashionable during the 1930s and 1940s. Therefore, despite the fact that al-Banna gave priority to social reform via religious preaching and charity activities, he also took two strategically significant steps during the early 1940s. Firstly, he decided that the Muslim Brotherhood would be involved in party politics and participate in the parliamentary elections of 1941 and 1945. Secondly, he established an armed wing for the Muslim Brotherhood (called the Secret Apparatus) that was involved in violence, not only against the colonial powers and Zionists in Palestine, but also against the Brotherhood's Egyptian political rivals.[18]

Since then, the problematic relationship between the political and preaching aspects of the Islamic movements has started, because each of these two aspects has its own characteristic way of organization, recruitment, membership, activism, and goals. Consequently, many drawbacks resulted from this hybrid nature of Islamic movements such as a lack of professionalism and vague strategies: should they give priority to social reform or political change; should they engage in politics as lobby groups, political parties, or revolutionary movements; should they train their members to be religious preachers or political activists and statesmen; etc. Yet, such comprehensive formula of the Islamic movements has proven to be very efficient in terms of the recruitment of members and the mobilization of resources, which masked to some extent these drawbacks and gave Islamic movements a false sense of achievement.[19]

Emergence of the Tunisian Islamic Movement

The contexts that catalyzed the emergence of the modern Islamic movement (i.e., reaction to modernity, Westernization, and secularization) and its problematic ideological and organizational design can be perfectly applied to the Tunisian case.

The Islamic reform movement in Tunisia came into existence as a reaction to the threat of imperial hegemony and increasing Western influence on their country's internal affairs in the 1830s. In this era, reformers, like Khairuddin al-Tunisi Pasha, attempted to reconcile Islam and modernity. However, after the direct French occupation in the 1880s, the existential danger was greater because of the aggressive 'frenchization' policies. The colonial power harshly attacked the traditional societal organizations, and the Arabic and Islamic identity of the Tunisian people. The reaction first came from the historical traditional religious establishment in Tunisia; al-Zaytouna Mosque, which (under the influence of the Egyptian reformer Muhammad Abduh) dedicated great efforts for the religious and educational development. Additionally, a national movement was established to defend the country's right to independence and it was headed by religiously committed leaders, such as Abdul-Aziz al-Tha'albi, until the 1930s when a secular faction took over the leadership of the Tunisian liberation movement.[20]

However, neither the al-Zaytouna religious and educational reforms nor the national liberation movement's endeavors resulted in the establishment of a mature Islamist social movement. Interestingly, the crystallization of the Islamist social movement in response to the threat of Westernization and secularization did not happen during the French colonization period, but in the post-independence state under al-Habib Bourguiba's regime.

Interestingly, the crystallization of the Islamist social movement in response to the threat of Westernization and secularization did not happen during the French colonization period, but in the post-independence state under al-Habib Bourguiba's regime

After independence in 1956, the first president of the Tunisian Republic, Bourguiba, established a semi-totalitarian regime, aiming at top-down modernization of the state based on the French laicism model, especially of the Third French Republic.[21] Bourguiba's crackdown on the 'infrastructure of institutional Islam in Tunisia' was extensive. He abolished the endowment, Waqf, cancelled the Islamic courts, closed al-Zaytouna University, secularized the family laws, and daringly criticized the Islamic rituals such as the religious veil, Ḥijāb, and fasting during the month of Ramadan.[22]

These anti-religious and pro-Western policies represented the culture factor which stimulated the establishment of the Islamist movement in Tunisia in the late 1960s. However, other political and economic factors also played an important role. Failure of other ideological projects, such as socialism (after the disastrous experiment of the Prime Minister Ahmed Ben Saleh in the 1960s) and Arab nationalism (after the humiliating Arab defeat in the 1967 war with Israel), brought back the question of religion, because, for many intellectuals at that time, there was no other way to proceed.[23] Others pointed to the failed economic development projects, economic injustice, and corruption as an essential context for the emergence of the Tunisian Islamist movement. Owing to such frustration, the Islamist movement was able to recruit many of those disappointed and harmed by the failed economic development projects.[24]

All these factors allowed for the emergence of the modern Tunisian Islamist movement and by the late 1960s and early 1970s three main groups were established. The first was the Transmission and Preaching group, Tabligh wa Da'wa, which is Pakistani in origin and essentially apolitical. Its main goal is to call Muslims to be more committed to the Islamic practices. Secondly, the Islamic Liberation Party, Ḥizb al-Taḥrir, which is Jordanian in origin and aims to re-establish the Islamic Caliphate. It was a very small movement in Tunisia; however, it witnessed a remarkable growth in the early 1980s. The last group, which was called the Islamic Group, al-Jama'a al-Islāmiyyah, was established by a number of young university graduates, such as: Rashid al-Ghannoushi , Abdul-Fattah Mourou and Ehmida Enneifer in 1972. It was the latest but soon became the largest and the most influential group.[25]

Intellectual Trends Constituting the Tunisian Islamist Ideology

Concerning the Islamic Group, which constituted the basis for EMP, it started as a purely religious movement. Its activities were confined mainly to preaching Islamic principles in mosques, issuing a magazine entitled al-Ma'rifah (Knowledge) that addressed social and religious topics, and teaching the Islamic ethics to the group's youth.[26] However, during the entire 1970s, there was a continuous ideological debate within the Islamic Group because of the diversity and heterogeneity of the Islamist

legacies, from which the Group had synthesized its own ideology.

Rashid al-Ghannoushi elaborately discussed these competing ideological trends within the Islamic Group. He enumerated three constituting intellectual elements:

The first element was the traditional Tunisian religiosity, which – in turn – is a composite of three traditions: the Maliki jurisprudence school, the Ash'ari creed, and the Sufi moral education, Tarbiyyah.

The second constituent was the Salafi/Ikhwani religiosity (from al-Mashreq), which provided the ideology of the Tunisian Islamist movement with many elements:

1- The Salafi methodology that seeks to combat religious innovations and return to the authentic Islam of the Prophet's companions, and that gives supremacy to the religious text over the mind.

2- The socio-political thought of the Muslim Brotherhood, exemplified in the principles of comprehensive Islam and al-Ḥākimiyyah (The Islamic Governance).

3- The religious and moral education, Tarbiyyah, methodology that concentrates on values of piety, faith, and asceticism.

4- The binary mode of thinking that leads to categorization of other groups on the doctrinal scale into brothers and enemies, and that adopts a one-sided view, rejecting other cultures and even other Islamic schools.

The last and least developed element was the rational religosity. This trend was characterized by being too critical to the Salafi/Ikhwani constituent and too open to the other Islamic and even Western ideological sources. It aimed at restoring the consideration within the Islamist movement to many intellectual schools, namely:

1- The rational Islamic tradition, which is manifested in the legacy of Mu'tazilah school and the other traditional political Islamic groups that were historically opponents to Ahl al-Sunnah, such as the Shiites and Kharijites.

2- The nineteenth-century Islamic reform school, which includes Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Muhammad Abduh, and Abdul-Rahman al-Kawakibi. This school, as al-Ghannoushi stated, was totally disregarded by the Salafi/Ikhwani trend, which accused it of adopting a perverted version of Islam.

3- Maqasid al- Shari'ah school that calls for the teleological - instead of literal and textual - understanding of Islam.

4- The Western ideologies (especially the leftist trends) and its civilizational and social sciences contributions.[27] (Fig. 1)

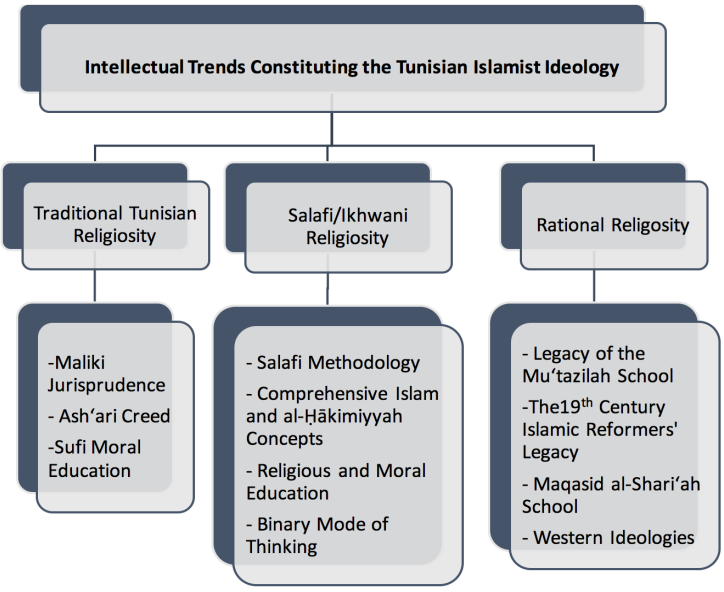

Fig. 1: Intellectual Trends Constituting the Tunisian Islamist Ideology

All these legacies and trends interacted and competed with each other within the Islamic Group during the whole 1970s. Yet,

according to al-Ghannoushi, they succeeded at the end to reach mutual compromises and positive co-existence, despite the fact that a group that represented the Islamic rationality trend defected in 1978 to form the Progressive Islamists' group.[28] Later on, in August 1979, the Islamic Group leadership organized a founding congress that brought together sixty members representing all the movement's cells. The congress took place in secrecy and the representatives agreed upon the structure and the basic rules of their organization.[29]

The Islamic Tendency Movement

The first transformation of the Tunisian Islamist movement was a result of many organizational, local and regional developments. In 1978, bloody clashes erupted between the Tunisian General Labour Union, TGLU, and the security forces on the basis of social demands. These protests, despite of being brutally repressed, opened an opportunity for political liberalization in 1980 and 1981. To contain the escalating social dissatisfaction, Bourguiba decided to alleviate the political congestion by appointing reformist politicians as ministers, releasing political detainees and trade unionists in jails, and promising to allow political polyarchy.[30]

In another vein, on 5 December 1980, the secret organization of the Islamic Group was accidentally uncovered by the police. The Islamic Group reacted to the opportunity of the political openness and to this security threat by deciding in its second congress (9-10 April 1981) to apply for official registration as a political party, declaring the necessity of resorting to open activities. On 6 June 1981, it was announced that the Islamic Group became the Islamic Tendency Movement.[31]

In addition to these developments, the ideology of the Tunisian Islamist movement was markedly affected by some regional factors. Rashid al-Ghannoushi mentioned that the Iranian revolution had a great impact on the ideology of the Islamic Group. Thanks to it, the Tunisian Islamist movement became more politicized, more aware of the socio-economic basis of its struggle, and more open to make alliances with other non-Islamist political groups. Also, he pointed to the influence of the Sudanese Islamist movement on the Tunisian Islamist ideology and how it helped Tunisian Islamists to go beyond the conservative Salafi/Ikhwani traditions regarding some issues, especially the women's rights.[32]

Reviewing the founding document of the Islamic Tendency Movement shows that it was still carrying the print of the Muslim Brotherhood

However, reviewing the founding document of the Islamic Tendency Movement shows that it was still carrying the print of the Muslim Brotherhood. This document, announced in June 1981, was characterized by the four typical features of the political Islam movements:

First, it declared its adoption of the comprehensive form of Islam, affirming the inseparability of religion and politics, and its commitment to practice politics untainted by secularism and pragmatism. Further, it described the call for the separation between politics and religion as an intrusive Christian concept and continuation of modernity's ills.

Second, it focused on identity politics, making its first two missions the revival of the Tunisian Islamic personality and the renewal of Islamic thought.

Third, it adopted a clear pan-Islamic ideology by assigning to itself the mission of participating in the restoration of the

political and civilizational entities of Islam at all levels: local, regional, and international.

Fourth, it listed a mixture of religious and political means to be followed in order to achieve its goals. These means included the restoration of the original role of the mosques as centers for worship and popular mobilization, launching an Islamized cultural movement, resisting authoritarianism, developing and embodying the modern ideal for Islamic governance, and developing and applying the principles of social Islam.[33]

The Tunisian regime found the movement's ideology and activities too dangerous for the modernization and secularization project of Bourguiba. Furthermore, the movement declared in its congress in April 1981 that the party in power was its 'principal enemy' and that it was necessary to make a broad coalition with the other opposition parties with the aim of overthrowing the regime.[34]

Therefore, the Tunisian authorities reacted aggressively to the rise of Islamism. First, they refused to give legal permission to the Islamic Tendency Movement party. Later, it arrested the movement's leaders and prosecuted them in the summer of 1981 and al-Ghannoushi remained in prison till 1984. Then, after short period of political de-escalation, in the wake of the 1984 Bread Uprising, the Tunisian regime started a second wave of repression in September 1987, in which hundreds of the Islamist leaders and members were prosecuted and al-Ghannoushi was sentenced to life time imprisonment.[35]

The Ennahda Movement Party (EMP)

After two months of the prosecutions, a major event in the Tunisian politics took place and provided new opportunities and threats to the Tunisian Islamist movement. On 7 November 1987, the Prime Minister Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali deposed the ageing president Bourguiba, declaring him medically unfit and taking up the presidency for himself under the article 57 of the constitution.[36]

In the beginning, Ben Ali attempted to strengthen his legitimacy by promising a democratic transformation and establishing a pluralistic political system – a promise that he would not to keep. Concerning the relationship with the Islamists, he promised to find 'a happy and final solution' to the Islamist problem.[37] Accordingly, the new regime took many steps to assure the Islamist movement and gain its support. Firstly, Ben Ali halted the crackdown on Islamist activists, granted presidential amnesty to those in prison, and allowed those in exile to return. Secondly, the movement was allowed to take part in the high council of the National Covenant by the end of 1988 and it was represented in the Islamic high council through the leader Abdul-Fattah Mourou in early 1989. Also, the movement was allowed to form an Islamic student union and was granted the right to publish a magazine, which was called al-Fajr (Dawn). Finally, the regime allowed the movement to take part in the parliamentary elections of 1989.[38]

In fact, the relationship between the EMP and the Muslim Brotherhood is slightly problematic. No doubt, the founders of the EMP (Rashid al-Ghannoushi and Abdul-Fattah Mourou) were greatly influenced by the Brotherhood's intellectuals (Hassan al-Banna and Sayid Qutb). However, they adopted an unorthodox version of Muslim Brotherhood ideolo¬gy, mixing it with other intellectual sources

In return, the movement reacted positively to these reconciliatory messages. It declared its support for the new regime and for Ben Ali in the presidential elections. It unhappily accepted the National Covenant despite of its extremely secular attitude.39 Furthermore,

to assure the new regime and to be consistent with the Tunisian law of political parties, which bans religious parties, the movement leaders decided to change their organization's name to the Ennahda Movement Party, removing the word Islamic from its title, and to revise and moderate its ideology.[40]

Although the new party platform seemed to be not very different from the founding document of the Islamic Tendency Movement, it showed more liberal and democratic features. It emphasized the sovereignty of the people and the necessity of civil society empowerment. Also, it declared preservation of the republican regime and its bases as its central objective.[41] Therefore, it was claimed that the EMP was a point of departure for the Tunisian Islamist Movement from the classical movements representing political Islam, namely the Muslim Brotherhood.[42]

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Concerning the organizational ties between the EMP and the Muslim Brotherhood, it has been affirmed that the Tunisian Islamist Movement was a part of the international entity of the Muslim Brotherhood, even if this entity was loose and not well-organized.[44] Mohamed Hamdi reported that the Tunisian Islamist Movement's decision to join the international entity of Muslim Brotherhood was taken early in the 1979 congress of the Islamic Group.[45]

Confrontation with Ben Ali's Regime

This rapprochement between Ben Ali's regime and the Tunisian Islamist movement came to an end after the 1989 elections. From the beginning, each party was suspicious about the real intentions of the other. Ben Ali aimed to alleviate the tensions with the Islamists without responding to their main demands, including the official recognition of their party. From his side, al-Ghannoushi, on the occasion of his release in May 1988, declared that Islamists' allegiance to the new ruler was conditional on the promise of the implementation of democracy and the restoration of the Arab and Islamic identity in Tunisia.[46]

In exile, the liberal democratic transformation of the EMP ideology was affirmed. Al-Ghannoushi, who left Tunisia for the exile after the 1989 election, started to advocate for an Islamic model of democracy that represents a marriage between the Islamic value system and code of ethics on the one hand and democratic procedures on the other

Once again, the break between the Tunisian regime and the Islamist movement was a result of many local and regional factors. The first breaking point was the confrontation with the president's party (Democratic Constitutional Rally) in the 1989 elections, in which the EMP changed its strategy from a political group seeking legal recognition and limited seats in the parliament to a party furiously competing for the parliamentary majority and claiming a serious Islamic alternative. On failing to secure any seats in the parliament, despite coming second after the ruling party, the EMP protested and accused the government of rigging the elections.[47]

Other important regional factors also had a role in aggravating this confrontation. Utilizing the opportunity of the Gulf War after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, the EMP strived to mobilize public opinion against the Tunisian government and raised harsh slogans, including 'eliminate the system'. As a response, the regime

waged a third wave of repression against the EMP in late 1990. Hundreds of its leaders and members were either prosecuted or forced to flee into exile, its official newspaper 'al-Fajr' was banned, and its student organization was dissolved.[48] Later, the bloody civil war between the Islamic Salvation Front and the regime in Algeria, Tunisia's large neighbor, casted a gloomy shadow over the relationship between Islamists and the regime in Tunisia throughout the 1990s.[49]

In exile, the liberal democratic transformation of the EMP ideology was affirmed. Al-Ghannoushi, who left Tunisia for the exile after the 1989 election, started to advocate for an Islamic model of democracy that represents a marriage between the Islamic value system and code of ethics on the one hand and democratic procedures on the other. He believed in the compatibility between democracy and Islam and argued that as 'the democratic system has worked within the framework of Christian values giving rise to Christian democracies and within the framework of socialist philosophy giving rise to socialist democracies', it could also work within the framework of Islamic values giving rise to Islamic democracy.[50] In this model, the Islamic political values such as shura (consultation), justice, and common good were mixed with the liberal democratic principles and tools (e.g., separation of powers, free and fair elections, devolution of power, citizenship, civil and political liberties, human rights, and civil society empowerment).

With the rise of the radical violent Salafism from the early 2000s on, both domestically in Tunisia and internationally, the EMP became more and more keen to emphasize its moderation, condemning resolutely the radical Islamist terrorism and at the same time reproaching the authoritarian regimes in the region and accusing them of being responsible for the rise of radicalism due to lack of liberties and compulsorily imposed secular policies.[51]

The Ennhada Movement Party in the Arab Spring

After two decades of political exclusion and repression, a new window of opportunity has been opened widely for the EMP with the Tunisian Revolution in 2011. With the growing frustration of the failed economic policies, widespread corruption, and political oppression, and on the occasion of the tragic suicide of Mohammed Bou-Azizi, massive protests erupted in Tunisia between 17 Dec 2010 and 14 Jan 2011. The Tunisian regime was surprised by the magnitude and the spontaneity of the uprisings, and after few inefficient attempts at containment and crackdown, Ben Ali was forced to flee.

Despite the fact that the EMP was not the initiator nor the leading power in the Tunisian Revolution, it was expected that it would achieve significant political gains in the new regime. Being the major political opposition to the overthrown regime and one of its main targets for oppression and exclusion, EMP gained popularity and trust in the post-Ben Ali period

From the beginning, the EMP was keen to prevent the regime from claiming that Islamists are behind these protests in order to frighten the secular trend in Tunisia and maintain the Western governments' support. In a common statement with other secularist parties, EMP emphasized the spontaneity of the uprisings and their justified social and political demands. In addition, the statement called all opposition parties to rise up for the moment and work together to impose a political reform.[52]

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would achieve significant political gains in the new regime. Being the major political opposition to the overthrown regime and one of its main targets for oppression and exclusion, EMP gained popularity and trust in the post-Ben Ali period.

To seize the opportunity, the EMP had to re-organize the party, settle internal disputes, and apply for legal recognition, which it was granted – at last – in March 2011. Moreover, to strengthen and protect its political position in the newly formed regime, EMP established a coalition with moderate secular parties and adopted a reconciliatory discourse to ensure various components in the Tunisian society.[53]

These steps proved to be appropriate as the EMP achieved the largest share of seats in the National Constituent Assembly election (held in Oct 2011). Consequently, the Troika alliance (a political alliance formed by three parties: EMP, Congress for the Republic, and Democratic Forum for Labour and Liberties) ruled Tunisia in the post-Ben Ali era through two successive governments, headed by the two EMP leaders Hammad al-Jabali and Ali Laarayedh.[54]

Nevertheless, the political rise of the EMP ignited serious political polarization between the secular and Islamist trends in Tunisia. Both trends engaged in a protracted conflict in which many strategies were used: strikes, sit-ins, street clashes, black campaigning, and religious preaching. The struggle revolved around many issues such as civil rights in the constitution, the transitional justice, codification of Sharia, and the political isolation of the old regime's figures. In the summer of 2013, influenced by the Egyptian military coup, the political conflict in Tunisia reached its peak with a great risk of the democratic transition collapsing. Yet, in January 2014, it seemed that Tunisia could manage to escape this catastrophic fate via a successful negotiation between the competing rivals that enabled them to reach an agreed-upon constitution and a national consensus government.[55]

The Tenth Congress of the Ennahda Movement Party

After surviving the life-threatening crisis of the summer 2013 and as a consequence of the EMP electoral retreat in the parliamentary elections of October 2014, the EMP leaders thought it was an appropriate time for evaluation. They started to prepare for the movement's tenth congress. Out of many issues to be addressed, the subject of the relationship between the political and the preaching activities of the EMP was the priority.

After surviving the life-threatening crisis of the summer 2013 and as a consequence of the EMP electoral retreat in the parliamentary elections of October 2014, the EMP leaders thought it was an appropriate time for evaluation

The EMP leaders promoted a document for the movement's bases, defending the separation between the political and the preaching and arguing that this separation would guarantee more efficiency and professionalism of the party, and would be more consistent with the political party laws in Tunisia. This decision was extensively discussed and debated within '279 local, 24 regional and 8 sectoral party internal conferences, held with the participation of over 6000 delegates' and finally the decision passed with the majority of 80.8%.[56]

Once approved, a wave of arguments and counter-arguments was sparked. Some commentators supported this decision, considering it an important step toward more political development. Others criticized it, claiming that it was dishonest pragmatism

and a shameful concession. Some argued that it was a historic decision and others believed that it was not that significant and it reflected the de facto status of the Movement, especially after the Arab Spring.[57]

Amid all these arguments and counter-arguments, it is hard to grasp the true meaning and significance of this decision. Nevertheless, it seems that the EMP is attempting to rebrand itself via a new ideology and a new structure. As for ideology, the EMP has decided to largely abandon identity politics for more practical policies-centered politics. Al-Ghannoushi, in his keynote speech, stated that 'A modern state is not run through ideologies, big slogans and political wrangling, but rather through practical programs'.[58] Also, the movement decided to abandon the traditional pan-Islamic agenda characteristic of political Islam movements and adopt a strictly national one, focusing on Tunisian causes.

Structurally, this decision means that the movement will become a classic party and give up its religious function of preaching. 'We are keen to keep religion far from political struggles, and we call for the complete neutrality of mosques away from political disputes and partisan instrumentalization', al-Ghannoushi affirmed.[59] In addition, this means that the organizational ties between the EMP and the international entity of the Muslim Brotherhood will be further weakened, if not cut altogether.

However, the significance of this decision, I believe, has been exaggerated and has produced an overreaction. Obviously, these changes in the movement's structure and ideology neither represent an extreme nor a sudden and unexpected shift in the course of the EMP evolution. Also, it does not entail the secularization of the movement structure or its ideology. Structurally, it is a mere 'functional specialization' as al-Ghannoushi explicitly stated.60 Regarding ideology, al-Ghannoushi has attacked secular extremists in his keynote speech, claiming an important role for religion 'as a catalyst for development and promoting work, sacrifice, truthfulness, and integrity, and a positive force in our war against ISIS and extremists and supporting the state's efforts in development'.[61]

Conclusion: Has Islamism reached its end?

Tracing the long path of transformations of the Tunisian Islamist Movement refutes the myth of the monolithic nature of Islamism and demonstrates how its ideology and structures greatly shaped by local and regional factors. It started as a purely religious group in the 1970s aiming at resisting the laic regime of Bourguiba through religious and cultural activities. Then, in the 1980s, it became politicized, thanks to many factors including the Iranian revolution, forming a classical political Islam movement with a pan-Islamic agenda. From 1989 until the early 2000s, it transformed into an unorthodox Islamist party adopting a liberal democratic version of Islamism. Finally, since the Arab Spring, it has become what might be called a post-Islamist movement, rejecting the hyper-politicization and ideologization of Islam, and at the same time acknowledging its role as a reference and a guidance for social life.

It will be an exaggeration to argue that the latest development in the EMP indicates the downfall of Islamism. Rather, it should be perceived as a new metamorphosis of Islamism into a less politicized and more cultural variant, and a kind of organizational remodeling after expiration of the totalitarian social movements' fashion

Therefore, it will be an exaggeration to argue that the latest development in the EMP indicates the downfall of Islamism. Rather, it

should be perceived as a new metamorphosis of Islamism into a less politicized and more cultural variant, and a kind of organizational remodeling after expiration of the totalitarian social movements' fashion. The era of comprehensive pan-Islamic movements is what may come to an end, but Islamism as 'political activity and popular mobilization in the name of Islam'[62] is still there and it seems to be so for undetermined long periods of time.

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Rise and Alleged Fall of Islamism: The Case of Ennahda Movement Party

At its tenth national con¬gress, Ennahda Movement Party declared that it will separate politics from preaching and transform itself into a nation¬al democratic party. This decision was perceived as an indication of the downfall of Islamism. However, tracing the ideological and organizational evolution of the Tunisian Islamist movement shows that it is highly dynamic and adaptable. Therefore, the latest developments should be perceived as a new metamorphosis of Islamism and an organizational remodeling of its movement in response to the opportunities and challenges it has faced since the Arab Spring

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