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Explaining the distinction between religious and political activism in Islamism: evidence from the Tunisian case

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Abstract

Tunisia's Islamist movement Ennahda has announced a separation of political and religious work, apparently reinforcing a “post-Islamist” argument that Islamic parties have left behind religious mobilization. However, the boundary between religious and political fields is highly porous. We ask why the distinction between religious and political activism remains a point of ambiguity within Islamism. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with 48 men and women who participated in the movement in the 1970s and 1980s in Tunis and Sousse, we develop a microlevel explanation of Islamist mobilization. We argue that religious and social Islamist activism is replete with political intent, which worked through three mechanisms: a counter-hegemonic ideology, an activist engagement in social transformation, and a formal organization. These findings add empirical insights to the case of Ennahda, provide leverage in explaining the politicization of Salafist movements, and underscore the legacy of asymmetric party capacities in shaping outcomes in a democratic transition.

Keywords: Ennahda; Islamism; social movements; Tunisia

Introduction

In the years after the 2011 Arab uprisings, the Tunisian Ennahda movement announced it would relinquish its Islamist past to become a party of “Muslim democrats.” Rached Ghannouchi, the movement's founder-leader, framed this transformation as a move away from a religious social movement toward a specialization in formal politics. “Our objective is to separate the political and religious fields,” he said (Ghannouchi, 2016, 63). This political turn, which came amid a fraught democratic transition, seemed to reinforce an influential scholarly reassessment of Islamism which identifies the separation of political, social, and religious dimensions into a “post-Islamist” project (Roy, 2004; Bayat, 2007). Post-Islamism meant not simply pragmatic behavior, the “triumph of practice over theory” (Nasr, 2005, 20),

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but an ideological “break” from the original Islamist paradigm (Bayat, 2013, 26). Political goals, including participation in a pluralist, civil state and the defense of individual freedoms, had surpassed the initial religious mobilization.

However, this apparently distinct boundary between religious and political fields has proven highly porous. Even within Tunisia’s Ennahda, which seemed to epitomize the post-Islamist turn, societal and political activism continued to interact after 2011 around highly contested topics involving state media, education, and religious governance (Donker, 2013, 210). Similarly, research among Turkish Islamists found identity work on everyday practices at a societal level accompanied, but did not replace, formal political work (Tuğal, 2009). Nor does the shift from religious activism to political work always progress in a single direction; it may operate in reverse. Amid the repression of the 1990s, Ennahda itself resolved to cede its political ambitions in favor of cultural and social work (McCarthy, 2018a, 79). Some prominent Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood activists likewise argued after the 2013 coup that the movement should relinquish political work and return to “broad-based religious, societal reform” (Darrag, 2017, 225).

In this article, we ask why this distinction between religious and political activism remains a point of ambiguity within Islamism. Rather than conceptualizing Islamism as an integration of religious and political dimensions followed by their inevitable separation, we argue that from the outset religious social activism was replete with political intent. This is not to exceptionalize Islam as a highly political religion (Cook, 2014), but rather to identify and elaborate the political character of the revivalist reimagining of the world. We draw on a microlevel, practice-oriented study of the organization that became Tunisia’s Ennahda, to reconstruct the political juncture of the 1970s and 1980s when religious social activism and political mobilization developed in a cohesive project. We capture the meaning-making and mobilizational forms which distinguished this project as it established a deep organization. We interrogate the nature of *da’wa*, which is both a counter-hegemonic discourse and a practical activity of social, religious, and political reform. The term *da’wa*, literally the call to believe in Islam, is usually understood as a religious duty to achieve greater piety and correct conduct (Kuiper, 2021). However, we show *da’wa* is not just religious or civil society activism but also contains within it the political. We conceptualize the political here to mean the practical activity of transforming the world, which worked through three social mechanisms: a counter-hegemonic ideology, an activist engagement in social transformation, and a formal organization.

These findings make three contributions which help explain how a practice-oriented understanding of the origins of an Islamist party like Ennahda adds leverage to the analysis of contemporary Islamism. First, we make an empirical contribution by identifying the political implications of social activism in Tunisia’s Ennahda movement, which is a foundational aspect often overlooked in the literature (Hamdi, 1998; Allani, 2009; Wolf, 2017). Most studies of the movement derive their assumptions from the accounts of leaders and their top-down perception of the organization as highly politicized, but this overlooks a large and often marginalized community of Islamist activists whose experiences shape their attachment to the contemporary Ennahda party. This empirical evidence develops a more nuanced understanding

of the party's contemporary turn to "Muslim democracy," in which the original bonds of social identity are tested by political participation and compromise. Second, the findings help analyze contemporary Salafist movements, which are increasingly prominent and which follow a similar, if complex and ambiguous, path toward politicization (Meijer, 2013; Cavatorta and Merone, 2017). Third, a micro-level focus on the founding period of an Islamist party helps explain contemporary party and party system dynamics. Not only do the "genetic" origins of a party weigh on its organization for decades (Panebianco, 1988, 50), but authoritarian conditions can leave a legacy of asymmetric party capacities, in this case a highly organized, deeply rooted Islamist movement-party (Lust and Waldner, 2016). These asymmetries contribute to shaping outcomes in a democratic transition.

The article proceeds as follows. First, we examine how scholars have understood the connection between *da'wa* and politics. Second, we present a theoretical account of religious social activism. We then explain case selection and research methods, before analyzing the Ennahda case study through three mechanisms: counter-hegemonic ideology, social mobilization, and political organization. Finally, we discuss the implications of the findings.

Connecting *da'wa* and politics

The political ambitions of Islamic activists are often explained in the literature as a problem of strategic or organizational difference. Scholars highlight distinctions between normalized conservative political parties and a separate trend of re-Islamization from below (Roy, 1994), or between movements seeking political power and grassroots projects organizing at the local level (Kirdiş, 2015; Volpi and Stein, 2015). Others note organizational connections across these two levels. Adherents are likely drawn in first by preaching focused on piety and religiosity and then, in a second stage, they may be introduced to political practices embedded in teachings aimed at religious self-improvement and social justice (Deschamps-Laporte, 2014). Social service provision can generate a reputational advantage for Islamist political parties (Cammatt and Luong, 2014), alternatively Islamist activists may also use civil society to critique political compromise by the party (Sigillò, 2023). The relationship between the original piety movement and later political ambition is often a source of ongoing internal tension (McCarthy, 2018a; Meijer, 2021).

Yet it is the formal political work of these groups that has come to dominate the literature through the inclusion-moderation framework, which examines how the institutional constraints of political participation pressure Islamists to change their behavior and ideology (Wickham, 2004; Schwedler, 2006; Broucker and Künkler, 2013). This focus on Islamism as a formal political project emerged as a valuable critique of earlier tendencies to reduce these movements to their religious characteristics, either as mere "fundamentalism" (Davidson, 2013) or as a form of religious revivalism and renewal (Voll, 1983). However, in shifting focus to party system competition there was a tendency to overlook how these political ambitions remain connected to their original religious social movements. The political was often reduced to formal party politics, and party development was measured in terms of institutionalization and democratization.

Analyzing the meanings and practice of grassroots activism redirects discussion of Islamist mobilization away from formal political institutions and vote-seeking behavior toward alternative modes of political action. The social activism of Islamist movements is not solely about developing vertical ties to the political project, but also creates horizontal networks. It was Hassan al-Banna, founder of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, who did most to reconceptualize *da'wa* as an organizational strategy suited to modern politics, with emphasis on outreach through new social spaces and media (Mahmood, 2005, 63). Examining the modern Muslim Brotherhood, Wickham identified a value-driven *da'wa* articulated through lower middle-class networks as “a new ethic of civic obligation that mandated participation in the public sphere, regardless of its benefits and costs” (Wickham, 2002, 120). Such activism flourished in a vast parallel Islamic sector of private mosques, voluntary associations, commercial enterprises, and professional associations, which became sites of political contest (Wickham, 2002, 97–99, 179). Clark similarly argued *da'wa* was operationalized not merely as proselytizing or preaching but as “ideology through action,” or “the very act of ‘activating’ Islam through deed in all spheres of life” (Clark, 2004, 14). This activism may operate through mechanisms conceptualized as “everyday practices” which create alternative hegemonic projects through new everyday routines (Tuğal, 2009), or similarly through social practices, which model a social vision, communicate a group’s project, and build connections into new social spaces (Rock-Singer, 2020).

Tunisia’s Ennahda party is often considered exceptional among Islamist movements for its early politicization, accepting pluralist and democratic principles in the early 1980s long before it gained access to the political process (Burgat, 1993; Camau and Geisser, 2003, 267–313; Meijer, 2021). Accounts of Ennahda’s development tend to understate the importance of *da'wa* activism in these early years (Burgat, 1993; Allani, 2009), or to consign it only to the formative stages of the movement before it declared its political ambitions in 1981 (Wolf, 2017, 55). This scholarly tendency has been reinforced by the recent framing adopted by the movement’s leadership, presenting Ennahda as a party that left Islamism to enter “Muslim democracy” (Ghannouchi, 2016). At a 2016 party congress, Ennahda redefined itself through “functional specialization” (*al-takhassus al-wazifi*) as a political party, giving up its social, cultural, and preaching work (McCarthy, 2018b) and embracing an agonistic, pluralistic conception of politics (March, 2024). Founder-leader Rached Ghannouchi framed this development as a sequential differentiation, by which Ennahda formally ended its social, educational, cultural, and religious activities to focus solely on party politics.

However, this scholarly preoccupation with Ennahda’s political work, reinforced by the leadership’s contemporary framing, has two shortcomings. First, it tends to separate *da'wa* from politics, concealing the complex porosity between religious and political dimensions. Second, it understates the extent to which Ennahda’s current project is the consequence of a deep social movement, which was rooted in the sociology of the urban lower middle class. Ennahda was a movement which developed through social and political mobilization not just in schools and universities, where it came into conflict with leftist organizations, but also in the “new social periphery” of rapidly urbanizing neighborhoods (Zghal, 1991), which became the sites of religiously oriented social practices.

Theorizing religious social activism

This article asks why the distinction between religious and political activism remains a point of ambiguity in scholarly explanations of Islamism. The central problem is the question of how to disentangle the complex relationship between religion and politics within Islamist movements. We identify social mechanisms that transform a religious identity into a collective political struggle, drawing on an understanding of mechanisms as altering relations among social elements during episodes of contentious claim making (McAdam et al., 2001, 24–26). We propose three mechanisms are at work in combination: a revivalist ideological vision, which is a cognitive reinterpretation of the world and a shifting of awareness; an activist engagement in transforming society through everyday practices, which creates new networked connections among individuals; and the construction of a formal organization, which routinizes these connections into a coherent collective identity and socio-political project. These mechanisms alter the connections between the individuals drawn to the nascent Islamist project (McAdam et al., 2001, 26).

Understandings of the revivalist vision of the world often tended toward historical and ideological explanations. Voll, for example, drew an explanation of the Islamic “resurgence” from the 1970s as deeply rooted in Islamic tradition and yet still containing a radical project of authenticity and morality. “A long-standing revolutionary or revitalizing tradition within Islam is being more fully reactivated,” he argued (Voll, 1983, 43). But this revivalism soon became a social religious phenomenon of re-elaborating Islam as an ideology with modern political implications. It drew on transnational ideas, absorbing intellectual influences from the Iranian revolution as much as from the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. Some scholars see Islamic doctrine, identity politics, and law acting as a hegemonic effort to absorb and displace the political as an independent field (Meijer, 2018, 182). However, here we consider revivalism as not merely the discourse of a religious movement but as a counter-hegemonic intellectual project, which leads to a transformative form of political action (Butko, 2004). Religious social activism is indeed the result of a cultural and religious symbolic conflict, but it is politicized as an ideology of mobilization through systematic action.

The second mechanism at work, which was often understated in earlier explanations of revivalism, is activism to transform the social world. Much of the literature on the activist nature of the Islamist *da'wa* project comes from the Egyptian case study, in which Islamist activism was enabled by a large network of autonomous Islamic institutions (Wickham, 2002). However, such institutions did not exist in the Tunisian case, where the regime enforced tight constraints on the religious sphere. Instead, as Tuğal found in the Turkish case (2009), Islamists worked through everyday practices to generate collective identity. We conceptualize political activity as extending beyond formal politics because the Islamic reference provides agency, ethical responsibility, and a set of goals for the community (Anjum, 2012, 16, 51). Islamist movements enable an activist project through an understanding of *da'wa* in which the individual is responsible for implementing reform and for standing against injustice. This project relies on the personal engagement of individual activists, who reconciled their personal faith and spirituality with an everyday practice to reform their social world.

The third mechanism, which connects the revivalist ideology and the *da'wa* project, is the creation of an organizational structure. This organization was the group (*al-jamā'a*), which the classic Islamist theorists of the twentieth century, Abu Ala Maududi, Hassan al-Banna, and Sayyid Qutb, conceived of as a dedicated cohort of morally committed individuals (Butko, 2004, 53). In the case of al-Banna, the group would construct a distinct collective identity, generated around a clear set of aims, duties, and norms through which Islamic values would be integrated into all aspects of everyday life (Al-Anani, 2013, 43). Qutb saw the group as a vanguard, which isolated itself from the corrupting influence of society and worked through preaching and persuasion (Calvert, 2013, 224). The collective identity forged among Islamists by the group proved highly resilient, creating a sense of belonging that persisted despite the changing fortunes of the Islamists' political leadership.

Research design

We develop these arguments through a qualitative research design using process tracing to explain the politicization of the Tunisian Islamist movement Ennahda. Although primary source documents from the movement offer valuable insights into intellectual production at the time, they reveal less about the quotidian work of activism and organizing, which can only be recovered through open-ended interviews with movement leaders, organizers, and local-level members. Taking a practice-oriented approach, we develop an account based on micro-level experiences to theorize the mechanisms connecting religious outreach to political activism. We focus on insider meanings to show how these understandings were formed and how they shaped the development of a religio-political movement (Schatz, 2009). Open-ended interviews are valuable in assembling the variation in individual experiences, perceptions, and understandings, particularly at the local level of political activism, which we argue is central in this case. These accounts are often occluded in research on Islamism, which tends to focus on ideologues and political leaders, as if they embody the nuances and ambiguities of their organizations. Our goal is to capture sequences and conjunctures of events as they unfold through the early years of politicization of the Islamist movement (Bennett and Checkel, 2015, 7).

We select the Tunisian Ennahda movement as a critical case in developing a more nuanced understanding of Islamist origins (Flyvbjerg, 2006). What stands out in the literature is the premise that Ennahda was a highly politicized movement from the start, focused on capturing state power and with little social or religious outreach (Burgat, 1993; Hamdi, 1998; Allani, 2009). This assumption only seemed confirmed when in 2016 the movement announced it would specialize as a professional political party, renouncing its Islamist past to present itself as a pioneer of what it called Muslim democracy. Ennahda, therefore, appears a most-likely case of the theory that Islamist parties develop by differentiating their political ambition from their original *da'wa* activism. However, we challenge this account by demonstrating how in this case politicization was not differentiation of the religious and the political but rather a product of the simultaneous engagement of religious revivalism, social mobilization, and political organization.

The article draws on semi-structured interviews with 48 men and women who participated in the movement in the 1970s and 1980s, using this timeframe to capture change over an extended period. Interviews were conducted between 2014 and 2022, in Tunis and in Sousse, the country's third largest city and a key site of early Islamist activism. We selected our participants using a chain-referral or snowball sampling strategy (Atkinson and Flint, 2001). Trusted connections were crucial in contacting current and former members of the Ennahda organization, who remain guarded in a polarized and repressive context. Our approach therefore relied on participants' networks and semi-structured interviews, but it was different from research designed to administer survey questions to hard-to-reach populations (see, e.g., Khoury, 2020). Interviews were contextualized against party documents, Islamist writings, news reports, and memoirs. Further information is contained in the Supplementary Material file.

Counter-hegemonic religious revivalism

We identify three mechanisms through which activists in Tunisia's nascent Islamist movement were mobilized into a political project. The first stage we identify is the framing of a revivalist project, which provided the ideological underpinning and which, we argue, presented the Islamist vision as counter-hegemonic. This was cognitive work, reinterpreting the challenges presented by modern Tunisian society and proposing a new program of reform. The project was articulated by the group's most influential figures at first, but soon diffused down to the grassroots of the movement.

In Tunisia in the late 1960s, a group of young preachers, especially Rached Ghannouchi, Abdelfattah Mourou, and Hmida Ennaifer, who would together go on to establish Ennahda, began to spread what Mourou called a "new [religious] speech ... in the mosques and in society" (Mansour, 2015a).¹ At first, these preachers modeled themselves on the Tablighi Jamaat, a South Asian preaching movement focused on a moralistic renewal of faith. Ghannouchi had encountered Tablighi preachers while a student in Paris; others had met them as they traveled through Tunisia. However, after the three preachers were arrested and questioned by police while preaching in the Tablighi style at the Great Mosque in Sousse in 1973, they revised their approach, re-orientating themselves toward a more explicit religio-political ideological project through a mobilizing conception of *da'wa*. As Ghannouchi said: "We decided to stop using *tablighi* methods and to concentrate on the two main methods of *da'wa*: public lectures or printed publications on the one hand, and organizing a number of regular, small and secret meetings in our homes to increase our knowledge of Islam and its teachings on the other" (cited in: Hamdi, 1998, 21). The revivalist message now took on social and political dimensions.

Intellectual content provided the backbone of the project. At first the group printed and sold small pamphlets containing Prophetic hadith, recording the words and actions of the Prophet Mohammad. "We found ourselves reprinting the same edition three or four times ... We discovered this alert society that was waiting for something," said Ennaifer, one of the founders of the group.² They circulated a monthly magazine, *al-Ma'rifa* (The Knowledge), owned by a sympathetic shaykh from the Zaytuna mosque-university in Tunis. Through the magazine the preachers

disseminated their new ideas, including their critique of the authoritarian system in Tunisia, and presented other Islamist arguments, especially from the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood (Burgat, 1993, 185). Many *al-Ma'rifa* articles discussed moral reform and provided Qur'anic commentaries, written by Tunisian preachers like Mourou, or by others from outside Tunisia, including the Egyptian Islamist Sayyid Qutb. But there was also an emphasis on the cultivation of an Islamic community, built on a revivalist and civilizational understanding of Islam. The first issue of *al-Ma'rifa*, in September 1972, included articles on implementing Islam in the modern age by building an "Islamic group atmosphere" and "an Islamic culture that is true, deep, and realistic" ('Mawqif al-shabab', 1972). The elevation of this new Islamic community was based on a critique of Western influence and the loss of Arab cultural identity (Ghannouchi, 1973). Ghannouchi wrote: "We hope to contribute to the development of an Islamic civilizational project through which Muslims will regain their position as a major force in the world" (Ghannouchi, 1978).

This reformist project was launched into a context lacking the resource opportunities identified elsewhere. While in Egypt, from the 1970s onwards, a wide network of autonomous Islamic institutions provided opportunities for Islamist mobilization (Ibrahim, 1988; Wickham, 2002, 93), in Tunisia there was no comparable network. Instead, Islamist organizers framed their project as a counter-hegemonic reformist discourse, based on a critique of the secularizing politics of Habib Bourguiba, Tunisia's post-independence president who curbed the power of the clerics. This critique resonated with the movement's new followers: "Bourguiba was secular. We saw that he took us away from religion and we saw a lot of corruption, away from morality and religion, a lot of deviation," as one female local activist at the time put it.³ Several participants described the direct effect of Bourguiba's secularizing policies if their relatives had studied at the Zaytuna mosque-university, which lost its independence under Bourguiba. They drew heavily on the literature of Islamists from elsewhere in the region, including Hassan al-Banna, Sayyid Qutb, Yusuf al-Qaradawi, Abul Ala Maududi, and Ali Shariati.⁴ This literature, and the 1979 Iranian revolution, which was sympathetically covered in *al-Ma'rifa*, contributed to a new critical Islamic discourse. "We were young people, and we were speaking another language that was different to that of Zaytuna. It was the language of Islamist writers," said one Ennahda leader who was a young activist at the time and whose father had been a Zaytuna-trained cleric.⁵ In place of Bourguiba's modernist project, the preachers proposed a new, totalizing world view. One activist at the time explained how Islam was presented as a "civilizational project," echoing the arguments published in *al-Ma'rifa*: "Islam, they said, is a religion organizing the life of people in all its aspects: cultural, political, social, economic. It was a religion that had answers to all the human problems. This new speech attracted our attention and led us to follow the movement."⁶

Their *da'wa* activism was also a call to action which implied social and political reform. It was a sharply distinct discourse from that of the traditional mosque preachers, or the regime's instrumentalization of Islam. "It was about the renewal of Islamic thought, the foundation of an Islamic state. It wasn't like the official Islam. It was something fascinating," said one activist who attended these preaching sessions as a young man.⁷ Lectures on Islam taught not only morality, but a correct and healthy lifestyle. As one Islamic Group member put it:

The movement was for me the alternative to what existed in the reality. As a religiously engaged person, I saw that they could realize that utopia (*al-madīna al-fāḍila*) that I dreamt of ... a place where people love each other, where there is morality and good behavior and tolerance, a model of society where all people are integrated, even the marginalized.⁸

The young revivalist preachers, who were soon recognized as shaykhs lecturing in mosques and youth centers, promoted new local groups. As Mourou himself explained: “I started to go around [and preach] in different mosques, instead of remaining in one place. For each mosque we left a sign, or a library” (Mansour, 2015b). Those who attended these preaching sessions emphasized how religious understanding was applied to contemporary political and social challenges. As one early member said: “Before becoming a movement (*al-haraka*), the Islamists were a group (*al-jamā‘a*) in the larger sense: preachers (*du‘at*) teaching religion in the mosques but in a way that religion was to be applied to the social and political reality we lived in. They wanted Islam to become something that matters in daily life.”⁹ The first stage in this process was to learn and absorb the new counter-hegemonic discourse, a mechanism which reinterpreted the perceived crisis of modernity and proposed a new response based on an ideological and activist dimension of Islam with its civilizational overtones.

Social mobilization

If the *da‘wa* project started with a counter-hegemonic call to action, the next mechanism was the creation of a new social and religious movement, for which the main theatre of activism was the social space of local neighborhoods. This was an activist engagement to transform the social world through everyday practices, which created a new network of connections among individual participants. In 1970, the single-party Tunisian regime had switched strategy from a planned economy, with import-substitution industrialization and agricultural cooperatives, to export-oriented economic liberalism, the first state in the Middle East and North Africa to embrace the liberalizing reforms known as *infitāḥ*, or opening up (Alexander, 2010, 76). An economic downturn soon followed, with rising unemployment amid mass rural to urban migration. For the first time university campuses were established in cities beyond Tunis and new residential neighborhoods were built around the major cities.

These sites became an opportunity for activism which began in the mosque but spread outwards into society. “In 1976 a new mosque was built in our neighborhood in Hayy Ibn Khaldoun [a peripheral neighborhood of Tunis]. We started to meet in the mosque as a group and we started to know each other,” said one local activist at the time.¹⁰ At this point in the 1970s, there were few restrictions on who could preach or meet for discussions in the mosques. Small neighborhood mosques could be funded by community donations. Several participants described a similar pattern of engagement, which began with open discussions about religious topics in the mosque, from which some would be invited to attend smaller, closed discussions, or “circles” (*halaqāt*), in private houses. One current Ennahda leader, who was a teenage activist at the time, noted: “In the mosque, attending was a choice. You could

enter, or not. You could learn by heart, or not. But in the circles in the houses we were committed.”¹¹ This “commitment” ranged from memorizing Qur’anic verses, to contributing funds, to adhering to a new set of behaviors. Another young activist, a medical student at the time, was appointed a preacher at a mosque in central Sousse, which hosted religious discussion meetings:

Everyone knew his obligations, and everyone had a team behind him. There were meetings in the mosques and also meetings that were closed, in the houses. These meetings were about having people, very close friends who were 100 percent with you. Each meeting, weekly, you had to recite a few new chapters from the Qur’an by heart and then we studied the life of Prophet and Islam to reinforce our culture.¹²

In these private meetings, local groups typically read and discussed religious texts. As one female organizer said: “The topics were general and about personal morality: that people should be sincere, honest. We talked about self-discipline and the Prophetic biography (*al-sīra al-nabawiyya*), how to be regular in praying ... about morals, about the creed ... For example, we took a hadith or a verse of the Quran and we discussed it.”¹³ This was the spread of *da’wa* activism first as preaching, and then as social mobilization.

Social activities within the group extended beyond religious study to incorporate identity building which focused on comportment and an alternative, moral, and modern way of life. Typically, a neighborhood group would develop a specific identity through civic activism or team sports. “We formed a football club of the mosque ... and went to the playground each Saturday and Sunday, just after the morning prayer. From there, other young people started to identify us as role models, as they saw us as a special group, for our behavior and because of the special spirit unifying us.”¹⁴ Several interviewees who were part of the Islamist movement in the 1970s and 1980s talked of these community-building sports, which included a moralistic, awareness-raising component and which identified potential future activists. As one local-level Ennahda organizer from Sousse recalled: “Even in the games of football we talked of the Prophet, we talked of Islam, we talked of prayers ... Three months after I began to pray with them, I found myself in a secret meeting of the movement.”¹⁵ For women in the emerging movement, the decision to wear the hijab was also understood as a sign of commitment to the new community, despite frequent confrontations with school or university authorities. One woman, who was a young activist from the late 1970s, learnt about the hijab during mosque circle discussions: “We did the discussion circles. We influenced each other, we multiplied, and there was a variety of women wearing the hijab.”¹⁶ Others were drawn into the movement through charitable work, either helping their peers with house-building projects or providing food and money to poor families. “We give aid packages (*quffa*) to the poor for Ramadan and we help the needy children in their studies. We gathered money on our own or from traders in the neighborhood, who respect and trusted our work,” said one early activist.¹⁷

These participant accounts highlight the use of religious teaching to develop political ambitions and challenge earlier scholarly explanations of the emerging Islamist

movement. Previously, scholars tended to understate the role of religious activism in what was seen as a highly politicized movement. The movement's religious goals were seen as "vague" and appealing merely to "cultural authenticity and increased religiosity" (Jones, 1988, 20) in a movement that prioritized elite-level bargaining for political inclusion (Alexander, 2000, 471). Instead, the accounts presented here show the movement engaged in everyday practices as a site of contention. These practices established a community of belonging, which, with its tight social ties, presented not just a challenge to the state but a resilient alternative project for society. Events organized by the movement's adherents at this early stage socialized young people in these lower middle-class urban areas. "We started to organize social, cultural, and recreational initiatives ... I would go to the youth center and perform theatre pieces," said one activist who took part at the time.¹⁸ These were not simply cultural or recreational events. Instead, this activism implied a new awareness of the world through the revivalist ideology. The two sides of *da'wa* activism, the intellectual content of preaching and writing, and the practical activity of sports, comportment, charity, and community building, informed each other. "We organized evening entertainments in our houses. Then we started to make study circles in a more consistent way," said the activist.¹⁹ By spreading a new religious vision of the world, based on Islamic ethics and solidarity, the social movement worked to construct a new political order. Early adherents to the movement understood the goal as building a new solidaristic identity. As one young activist at the time said:

The social phenomenon of participating in the Islamic awakening (*al-ṣaḥwa al-islāmiyya*) grew and this became a form of alternative to the Bourguiba system. We worked on the identity of the people that Bourguiba had marginalized or fought against ... The citizen came to see us because they identified us as experts in social and religious issues. They saw us as helping to solve problems ... This is part of an activity that is religious and political at the same time ... The activists are in the working-class neighborhoods and helped people with different social activism ... So we became a mass movement.²⁰

These accounts demonstrate *da'wa* activism represented the call to Islam but articulated through a new ideological message that went beyond preaching to immediately connect with social activism, the creation of a new identity, and the building of a new moral community. This mechanism developed new networks of belonging, established new forms of interaction and trust, and forged resilient social bonds. It was out of this social activism project that the political organization quickly developed.

Political organization

Religious revivalism, social mobilization, and political organization came together to form the project undertaken by groups like Ennahda. Just as *da'wa* cannot be understood without its ideological underpinning, so too the political importance and implications of the organization, which is in the modern idea of *da'wa*, cannot be grasped without its organic relationship with the social religious movement. The formal organization, the "group," routinized these new social bonds into a coherent collective

identity and socio-political project. At first, from the early 1970s, the Tunisian Islamists presented themselves as the Islamic Group (*al-Jama'ā al-Islamiyya*), a vanguard of religious believers united by faith and separate from society. The group brought together religious activists with different social backgrounds and what Ennaifer, one of the founder preachers, called a “plurality of ideas,” including some inspired by the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and others who favored a quietist, intellectual approach.²¹ In 1979, just months after Ghannouchi had praised the Iranian Revolution in *al-Ma'rifa*, the Islamic Group held a secret founding congress in Manouba, on the outskirts of Tunis, creating an organizational structure. The highest authority in the organization was the congress, to be held every three years and which would elect the leader and decide key policies. The group established a consultative council (*majlis al-shūrā*), a legislative body originally made up of 14 elected members; an elected executive bureau, with a range of sub-committees for finance, logistics, civil society, women, and the family and other tasks; and representatives for each governorate and major district as well as for universities and schools (Hamdi, 1998, 35; Daifallah, 2016). The group elected Ghannouchi as their leader and aligned themselves to the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. Two years later, in April 1981 the group held a second congress in Sousse to decide on a political project and then announced itself publicly as the Islamic Tendency Movement (*Harakat al-Ittijah al-Islami*, MTI), a religious movement immersed in social, cultural, and intellectual activism, but which also made a claim to enter the political system to establish “the contemporary image of an Islamic system of rule” (Harakat al-Ittijah al-Islami, 2012, 15). Further congresses followed in 1984, 1986, and 1988 before regime repression dismantled the movement and forced many leaders into exile for two decades until the Arab uprisings of 2011. Thus, as the social movement spread, the group of preachers became a formal political organization. This organization was formed through a top-down and bottom-up process, in which the preachers traveled through the country, spreading the Islamic awakening and encouraging their supporters to establish their own local groups (Mansour, 2015a). New local leaders emerged through charisma and strong local networks, connecting the preachers to the social roots of the group.

Although most scholarly attention has focused on the national political ambitions of Islamist groups like MTI/Ennahda, their overlooked political work at the local level was significant. Constrained by an authoritarian regime, these discrete networks and informal spaces were essential resources for mobilization (Wiktorowicz, 2004, 12). The first level of entry was the study circles at the mosques, involving religious, social, and recreational activities and drawing larger numbers of attendees. “People were thirsty for religion, because Bourguiba did his best to dry out our religious roots. Participation was very spontaneous,” said one female circle organizer.²² But these circles were public discussions which gathered a range of attendees with different values. From this wider group, some were selected to attend additional study sessions in private homes. These private meetings, known as a cell (*khaliyya*) or a circle (*dā'ira*), began in the late 1970s and combined both religious and political training, sometimes using literature published by the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. “We asked ourselves why, if Islam is a project for life and if it is comprehensive, then why doesn't it deal with political issues? And the doors began to open for us, to go beyond what we did at

the beginning,” said an early leader of the Islamic Group in Sousse.²³ These cells were the key units of the organizational structure, educating activists about the revivalist project and its new values. “Those who attended the public studies in the mosque, we didn’t rely on them a lot. But we did rely on the culture that was received by the people taking part in these cells,” said one teacher, who was a cell organizer from the time.²⁴ The period of training could vary from one to three years and continued even after the regime began imprisoning MTI leaders in a crackdown from late 1981. During this training, supporters were gradually assimilated, passing from the stage of sympathizers (*al-muta’atīfin*) to committed adherents (*al-multazimīn* or *al-muntamīn*) who had met moral criteria for entry and secured the backing of two movement members.

Once they were committed, members gave a monthly donation and swore a loyalty oath to the movement’s leader. These committed members became part of a family (*al-usra*), a term also used by the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood (Kandil, 2015), and they were entitled to attend the movement’s congress. The family was a higher unit in the organizational chain and in regular contact with the movement’s senior leaders. As one early activist explained:

In the first stage you only participate in the study circles ... If you prove to be trustworthy you can go to a second and a third level. After that, you are part of the structure, and can be elected as a representative of the different levels of the organization. The main characteristic of the leader of the cell is charisma and organizational capacity ... While some of the basic rules are typical of all political movements acting clandestinely ... the selection for becoming a full member were probably more selective for the Islamists than for other movements.²⁵

The core activist work at the local level was through the cell, led by a coordinator, and they were embedded in the social environment. They acted as a structured chain of transmission between the movement’s national leaders, with their formal political project, and the base of the social movement, with their different levels of engagement and commitment. “The movement developed therefore in the middle of a developing movement in society,” as one early organizer put it.²⁶ Early politicization of the Tunisian Islamist movement is often explained by vigorous Islamist student activism on campus (Wolf, 2017), a view typically repeated by movement leaders. The campus in the late 1970s and the 1980s provided a rare space for Islamist political activism. However, the politicization process cannot be explained without also including the socio-religious dimension of the local movement structures. Politicization in this case meant the integration of formal politics into *da’wa* activism.

Building the political organization was not a smooth process. Not only was there pressure from the regime, which jailed Ghannouchi and around 100 others in 1981 after uncovering details about the organizational structure, but there was also an internal factional dispute about whether to remain a sociocultural movement or to pursue legal authorization as a political party (McCarthy, 2018a, 41–47). With the top tier of leaders in jail, a younger generation took over, led by Hamadi Jebali, an engineer from Sousse who had taken part in the Tablighi Jamaat while a student in France. “There was not a real rigid structure until after 1984. Before, there was a

more systematic coordination among the leaders and the local groups, nothing else,” said one early organizer in the movement.²⁷ He explained how the movement adopted a new strategy which went beyond just rebuilding the organization under repression, to include “merging into society” (*intishār fi-l-mujtamaʿ*) and penetrating civil society organizations (*dukhūl fi-l-munazzamat*). In effect, the movement operated underground, denied legal authorization until after 2011. Activism took place discreetly and was heavily reliant on social trust or what one activist of the time called “selection” (*ikhtiyār*).²⁸

For some of those involved in the organization at the time, it felt like a mass movement ready for revolutionary action, a perception rarely considered in the literature. “We felt we were ready to take power, that we had the alternative ... In this juncture between 1985 and 1987 we tried to make a revolution,” said the activist.²⁹ From 1984, there were contests between the movement and the regime for access to and control over the mosques, at a time of political crisis heightened by riots over sharp food price increases. Again in 1987, there were more protests when the movement established mobilization committees and demonstrated against the Bourguiba regime, which responded by jailing thousands of MTI activists. The Islamist project had developed from a core of *daʿwa* activism into a project of political mobilization against the authoritarian regime. Local leaders of preaching cells soon became cadres in a political movement. The construction of the formal organization that was the “group” was a mechanism that transformed the revivalist ideology and the social mobilization into a coherent socio-political project with a new and enduring collective identity.

Following Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali’s coup in November 1987, the MTI renamed itself the Ennahda Movement (*Harakat al-Nahda*), to comply with a new political parties’ law. It was allowed to field independent candidates in the 1989 elections, in which it emerged as by far the largest opposition party, performing well in both rural southern constituencies and the wealthier coastal cities, and winning an official 15% of the vote, despite prevalent pro-regime fraud (Oueslati, 1989). Another round of protests followed, but was met with even more severe repression, culminating in show trials in military courts and long jail sentences for thousands of members. The movement within Tunisia was effectively dismantled for the next two decades, and only won legal authorization after Ben Ali’s regime was toppled in mass protests in 2011. The rebuilding of the movement began from the foundations of the identity-based community established in the 1970s and 1980s, and soon the organization developed a distinct political party formation. It participated in a decade-long democratic transition in which a more and more politicized Ennahda was to play a central role.

Conclusion

This article asked why the distinction between religious and political activism remains a point of tension and ambiguity within Islamism. Rather than conceptualizing Islamism as an integration of religious and political dimensions which, in the post-Islamist assessment, is now followed by inevitable separation, we argued that from the outset religious social activism itself was inherently political. We presented a microlevel, practice-oriented study of the organization that became Tunisia’s Ennahda, to reconstruct the political juncture of the 1970s and 1980s when religious

social activism and political mobilization developed in a cohesive project. We show *da'wa* is not just religious or civil society activism but also contains within it the political, meaning the everyday practice of transforming the world, which worked through three social mechanisms: an ideology, an activist engagement, and a formal organization.

The first decades of the Tunisian Islamist movement that became Ennahda were shaped through these three mechanisms. First, the project began with a counter-hegemonic ideology of revivalist Islam, a cognitive mechanism which developed a carefully articulated critique of the existing authoritarian system and made a call to action through the promotion of a new moralized alternative lifestyle. Second, this intellectual project was operationalized through *da'wa* activism, which was a mechanism of social mobilization involving the diffusion of a moral community of belonging founded on social ties. This activism took place across Tunisia in new lower middle-class urban neighborhoods, which were often beyond the reach of traditional politics under the authoritarian system. But this experience is overlooked in explanations of the emergence and consolidation of the Tunisian Islamist movement, which is often thought to have focused much more on formal political competition than comparable Islamist movements in the region. It is this class-based social location which distinguishes the emergence of Islamist "unsecular politics" from findings based on religiously oriented, cross-class movements operating in democratic systems elsewhere (Kalyvas, 2003). Third, out of an organic relationship with the social movement came the formation of an organization, the group (*al-jamā'a*), which was soon structured through local cells which were responsible for training and acculturation. It is the integration of these three mechanisms in one project that explains the capacity of Islamism for mass mobilization and potentially revolutionary politics.

Islamism has a revivalist dimension, based on *da'wa* and socio-religious activism. However, it is political because it transforms the revivalist project of reforming society into an organized action whose ultimate purpose is taking power. We find that *da'wa* works as an ideology which is both a counter-hegemonic discourse and a practical activity of social, religious, and political reform. These dynamics apply not only to Islamist movements like Ennahda, but are also relevant in explaining Salafist organizations, which have grown in prominence in the past decade, and which have in some cases responded to the opportunities presented by the 2011 Arab uprisings by turning toward a similar entangled process of politicization. This explanation of political nature of socio-religious activism challenges the idea that Islamist politicization is only explained by the work of professional party activists who institutionalize the party by departing from its religious, social, and cultural activism. Instead, Islamist politics is a specific activism derived from contemporary Islamic revivalism which contains a political aspect. These early decades of the Islamist movement that became Ennahda were foundational in shaping the form of the organization which eventually became a political party, and the resilient connections which tied together its community of adherents. These mechanisms explain the dynamics at work in a movement which over time moderated its political behavior and diluted its ideological vision to gain access to a competitive political system.

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Notes

1. Ghannouchi was a philosophy teacher born in 1941 in the southern village of al-Hama who studied at the Zaytuna mosque-university and the Sorbonne in Paris. Mourou was a lawyer born in Tunis in 1948 who studied at the Sadiki College and then the University of Tunis. Ennaifer was a theologian born in Tunis in 1942, who studied at the Zaytuna mosque-university and the Sorbonne.
2. Interview with T48, former MTI leader, Tunis, August 2022.
3. Interview with T43, local MTI and Ennahda member, Tunis, July 2022.
4. Al-Banna (1906–49) established the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood; Qutb (1906–66) was an Egyptian writer and theorist; Al-Qaradawi (1926–22) was an Egyptian Islamic scholar; Maududi (1903–79) founded the Pakistani Jamaat-e Islami; Shariati (1933–77) was an Iranian philosopher and writer.
5. Interview with T11, a senior Ennahda leader, Msaken, June 2014.
6. Interview with T42, a former regional Ennahda leader, Tunis, July 2022.
7. Interview with T01, senior Ennahda leader, Sousse, January 2014.
8. Interview with T43, local Islamic Tendency Movement & Ennahda member, Tunis, July 2022.
9. Interview with T41, regional Ennahda leader, Tunis, July 2022.
10. Interview with T42, former regional Ennahda leader, Tunis, July 2022.
11. Interview with T06, Regional & Senior Ennahda leader, Sousse, April 2014.
12. Interview with T02, former local Islamic Tendency Movement member, Sousse, March 2014.
13. Interview with T43, local MTI and Ennahda member, Tunis, July 2022.
14. Interview with T42, former regional Ennahda leader, Tunis, July 2022.
15. Interview with T03, local Ennahda leader, Hammam Sousse, April 2014.
16. Interview with T19, local Ennahda leader, Sousse, September 2014.
17. Interview with T41, regional Ennahda leader, Tunis, July 2022.
18. Interview with T42, former regional Ennahda leader, Tunis, July 2022.
19. Interview with T42, former regional Ennahda leader, Tunis, July 2022.
20. Interview with T41, regional Ennahda leader, Tunis, July 2022.
21. Interview with T48, former MTI leader, Tunis, August 2022.
22. Interview with T43, local MTI and Ennahda member, Tunis, July 2022.
23. Interview with T20, senior Ennahda leader, Tunis, October 2014.
24. Interview with T07, local MTI and Ennahda member, Akouda, June 2014.
25. Interview with T41, regional Ennahda leader, Tunis, July 2022.
26. Interview with T43, local MTI and Ennahda member, Tunis, July 2022.
27. Interview with T42, former regional Ennahda leader, Tunis, July 2022.
28. Interview with T41, regional Ennahda leader, Tunis, July 2022.
29. Interview with T41, regional Ennahda leader, Tunis, July 2022.

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