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ARTICLE

An organizational perspective on fading system-ness: Insights from Ennahda's post-specialization period (2016–2021)

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Abstract
About a decade after the Arab Uprisings, the Tunisian Ennahda party experienced the exodus of several high-profile leaders. Motivated by the party's growing factionalism and shrinking support, this article investigates the organizational factors that account for the low system-ness of an Islamist-born party following major organizational changes. It does so by drawing on interview data and organizational developments that unfolded inside Ennahda (2016–2021). In a framework that intersects the field of party politics and organization studies, this article argues that the major factors that account for Ennahda's low system-ness include (i) an inefficient and inadequate theorization of the need for the party's specialization in political activities, (ii) a problematic identification with the subsequently refashioned organizational identity, and (iii) an uneasy coexistence of distinct group identities involved in separate processes of organizational identity recrafting. This article concludes by challenging the way scholars traditionally conceive coherence, cohesion, and "change" in religious parties.

Keywords: Ennahda; Tunisia; Islamism; organizational change; system-ness

Introduction

Throughout its entire organizational history, Ennahda—a long-banned Tunisian Islamist-born movement—underwent a process of change that altered its organizational outlook, identity, and discourse considerably. Initially established as a religious proselytizing group (Hamdi, 1998), it later evolved into a clandestine political and oppositional movement renowned as the Islamic Tendency Movement (Harakat al-Ittijah al-Islami) and eventually renamed as Ennahda (Wolf, 2017). Despite being long-determined to enter the Tunisian political scene as an Islamic political party, Ennahda was never granted legal status until the aftermath of the Arab Uprisings

(Meddeb, 2019), after its founder and leader—Rached Ghannouchi—returned to Tunisia from exile to a hero's welcome (BBC Staff, 2011).

Since Ennahda's positive showing during the Constituent Assembly election in 2011, its party's leadership opted for a long series of concessions, which led to the approval of the 2014 Constitution, and pursued a strategy of self-containment (Cimini, 2021) and political and economic consensus (Marks, 2014; McCarthy, 2019; Fulco and Giampaolo, 2023). Upon the adoption of an often criticized overly conciliatory approach, especially *vis-à-vis* secular coalition partners and opposition forces, Ennahda's Tenth Congress (2016) decreed its exit from political Islam, announcing its specialization in the political activities of post-revolutionary Tunisia (Ghannouchi, 2016a)—seen by some as the culmination of a long-initiated process of change (Cavatorta and Merone, 2013).

Since its legal re-appearance in the Tunisian political scene, Ennahda experienced the exodus of several high-profile leaders and a progressive downsizing of its constituency. Despite coming ahead in the 2019 parliamentary elections, Ennahda's electoral base drastically shrank from 1,500,000 voters in 2011 to 560,000 in 2019 (Nafti, 2021). More alarmingly, in the post-specialization period (2016–2021), Ennahda's unity succumbed to the formation of competing power cliques. In September 2020, a group of 100 leaders threatened to tender their resignations unless Ghannouchi declared that he would not run again as a candidate for the party's leadership—a precondition they set before agreeing to convene the next Congress (100 Ennahda leaders, 2020). Following Tunisian President Kais Saied's power grab in July 2021 and Ghannouchi's arbitrary reshuffling of Ennahda's Executive Bureau (Kapitalis Staff, 2021), more than 100 leaders from the party's Shura Council and regional and local offices presented their mass resignation in a joint statement, proving Ennahda's low cohesion (Amara, 2021). While to some scholars, these disputes mirrored the pitfalls of Ghannouchi's longstanding stranglehold on power and the personal ambitions of a few within the party's top brass (Sadiki, 2020; Wolf 2021), they also cast light on deeper organizational fault lines. In light of Ennahda's growing factionalism and shrinking support, this article explores the organizational factors and dynamics that account for the low system-ness of an Islamist-born party[1] following a major organizational change.

This qualitative study mostly relies on the thematic analysis of primary data gathered during online interviews with current and former members of Ennahda conducted for a broader research project on the party's capacity for change and the overall impact that its prolonged engagement in institutional politics has had on the organization.

The article is structured as follows. After a short introduction and an overview of the research methods employed, it reviews past scholarly approaches to the study of change, party coherence and cohesion, and organizational survival in religious parties. Then, it lays out the key concepts of organizational change, agency, and factionalism in a framework that uniquely intersects the fields of party politics and organization studies. It proceeds with the case study of Ennahda's low system-ness before concluding with a discussion of the arguments presented in its core section and of conceptual insights applicable to the study of change and system-ness in other religious parties.

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Ultimately, this study's key findings suggest that three major factors account for an Islamist-born party's damaged coherence and cohesion after a significant organizational change. These include (i) an inefficient and inadequate theorization of the need for change, (ii) a problematic identification with a refashioned organizational identity, and (iii) an uneasy coexistence of distinct group identities. Although the case study of Ennahda is not conceived as a sample—hence, its findings are not generalizable to other classes of individuals and organizations—this article's concluding remarks draw conceptual "lessons learned" and "theoretical propositions" that might be applicable and verifiable in other Islamist-born and non-Islamist parties alike (Yin, 2014).

Notes on research methods

This research article adheres to the case study format. As a research methodology and a design frame, the case study of Ennahda is intended to be an in-depth, exploratory, and intrinsic study of its internal dynamics after a major organizational change (Creswell and Poth, 2018).

Aside from the extant literature available on the topic, this article draws on semi-structured interviews with 22 current and former members across Ennahda's organizational spectrum conducted in two rounds (September–November 2020; December–February 2021).[2] The lead author opted for online interviews due to the COVID-19 outbreak, which affected international travel. Interviewees were selected in accordance with "purposive sampling," taking into account (i) members' knowledge of the organizational dynamics unfolding within Ennahda in the timeframe considered in this article and (ii) a diversity of viewpoints and perceptions of those dynamics' repercussions that cut across generational and hierarchical lines within the party.

The sample intersects distinct age groups, with the youngest being in their early 20s and the oldest being in their late 70s. It also cuts across hierarchical lines, including participants belonging to three categories: (i) core supporters, (ii) mid-ranking leaders, and (iii) top-ranking leaders. In this study, we consider Ennahda's core supporters to be its Islamic constituency that includes young members of the Student Sections, as well as individuals with family and historic ties to the pre-existing movement who chose to remain active in civil society after 2016 rather than becoming full-fledged party affiliates. We deem mid-ranking leaders to be those members in charge of bureaus and committees (e.g., youth, media, local affairs, political bureau, parliamentary bloc), whereas we define top-ranking leaders as those senior and influential Nahdawis who were members of the Shura Council or the Executive Bureau, or were former ministers and advisors to Ghannouchi at the time of the interview.[3]

Despite relying on a small size sample of 22 interviews, this study reached adequate "thematic saturation" once a key theme relevant to the research question became a patterned response with no new themes or codes emerging from the interview data indicating a different pattern (Guest et al., 2020; Braun and Clarke, 2019). In conversation with the lead author, interviewees expressed their own understandings of and views on Ennahda's specialization in politics and its refashioned identity as a party of Muslim democrats. Furthermore, they also referred to fellow members' perceptions of Ennahda's new organizational identity and its specialization in politics

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in the post-2016 period. Thus, this process of "internal referencing" compensated for the lack of a large sample size, allowing the authors to build the argument in this article.

This study primarily employed an exploratory method of thematic analysis of verbatim transcripts conducted through manual and digital coding. Precisely, this article relies on a "hybrid coding scheme" that encompassed (i) a preliminary manual cycle of "descriptive coding" and (ii) a second cycle that involved both "focused" and "pattern coding" (Saldaña, 2013). The unit of analysis considered while coding was neither the sentence nor the paragraph. Instead, it was a message or an idea, which could assume either of the two forms. The thematic analysis of the qualitative data began with "a priori categories" derived from the research question and aligned with some conceptual ideas presented in this study's framework. However, during the coding process, the authors remained open and receptive to sets of emerging categories favoring "relevance" over "prevalence" as a key criterion in the analysis, considering that "prevalence of a given theme does not tell the whole story" (Joffe, 2011: 219).

Change and stability in religious parties: A literature review

The past decade saw the academic field of contemporary Islamic movements plunging into a state of epistemic stagnation, owing to the overuse of Social Movement Theory (SMT) and its variants as analytical tools to understand their pathways and determinants of change. Within this field of study, scholarly stands on "change" have often been intended as a moderating, progressive, and linear process, resulting from Islamist movements' inclusion in political processes (Wickham, 2004; 2013; Schwedler, 2011; Pahwa, 2017), with the exception of Cavatorta and Merone (2013), Hamid (2014) and Larkin and Nasasra (2021), who challenged this equation. The end product of the inclusion-moderation theory is what Bayat (2013: 7–9) referred to as the "post-Islamist turn," namely a "condition and a project," a metamorphosis of ideas, approaches, and practices derived from the exhaustion of the longstanding Islamist project, with its former emphasis on the ultimate aspiration of establishing an "Islamic state." This analytical category has perhaps been prematurely applied to examining the ultimate destination of Ennahda's long-initiated process of change (Cavatorta and Merone, 2015; Cavatorta and Torelli, 2021), though it denies these political actors their agency (Daadaoui, 2021) and undermines the role that organizational enablers and constraints to change can play.

Additionally, the scholarship on contemporary Islamic movements has abundantly examined Islamist pathways as evolutionary processes of maturation. Doing so presupposes the idea of change as a continuum from its genesis to its conclusion or to its latest condition. The most common approach applied to the case of Ennahda frames change as the end result of the maturation process led by Rached Ghannouchi, Ennahda's leader and co-founder (Yildirim, 2017; Kherigi, 2017; Merone et al., 2018)—a stand wrongly assuming that lower-ranking members within the organization play only a passive role by simply accepting new organizational ideas and a recrafted identity.

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Within this academic trend, the focus of analysis has often entailed a second term of comparison to which to relate Islamist groups and leaders, thus explaining "change" in relational and relativistic terms (Wickham, 2013). For instance, their ideology, conduct, strategy, and discourse have been predominantly examined and questioned *vis-à-vis* external categories, such as the state, the army, liberal democratic concepts, and other political contenders, thus discarding organizational dynamics.

In the post-Uprisings period, only a comparatively small number of authors have interpreted change in institutional and organizational terms, engaging with intraparty dynamics and factional politics (Drevon, 2017; Zollner, 2021; Vannetzel, 2017; Gumuscu 2023). Outside the SMT orbit, Abdelkader (2019) and Zollner (2021) have investigated social movement-party relations in the case of Ennahda and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood (MB) by employing New Institutionalism. By doing so, Zollner (2021) implicitly frames change as a successful or failed emancipation of a party from a parent movement that produced either more or less favorable conditions for a country's democratization. Within this scholarly trend, Vannetzel (2017) explains the MB's political failure in the post-Uprisings period by contending that the process of party formation of the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP)—the MB's political wing—was hindered by the parent movement's pre-existing organizational features. Recently, Gumuscu (2023) has shed light on the role played by intraparty politics while building a comparative case of the Turkish Justice and Development Party (AKP), the Egyptian MB, and Ennahda to provide an understanding of the reasons why some Islamist parties change significantly by committing to democracy while others fail to do so. Gumuscu (2023) highlights how within Ennahda, the control that the leadership of a more liberal faction had exerted over organizational resources and selective (recruitment and promotion) and collective (organizational identity) incentives sustained its attempt to build a dominant alliance within the party following the Arab Uprisings (Ibid).

Our article aims to enrich this scholarly trend by focusing on intraparty politics rather than externally oriented lenses to scrutinize organizational changes and their impact on organizational stability within Islamist-born movements. Following a national breakthrough and a major organizational change, a high degree of "systemness"—intended as the sum of cohesion and coherence—is indicative of organizational stability, hence determinant of political and organizational survival. Organizational coherence denotes the extent to which party members share a common value system and policy goals, by referring particularly to the degree to which party elites, new members, and grassroots activists share similar views on the party's ideological frame and key issues (Strom, 1990). Cohesion, on the other hand, is intended as the degree of unity and discipline achieved through the existence of institutional mechanisms that encourage party elites and core members to follow the party line, including party discipline rules, nomination procedures, and mechanisms of leadership rotation (Scarrow, 1996). These two organizational properties partially correspond to the organizational complexity and cohesion in Samuel Huntington's four-dimensional model.[4] Coherence and cohesion are tightly connected and, in the case of political parties, they depend on the degree of party institutionalization (Panebianco, 1988; Randall and Svåsand, 2002; Arter and Kestilä-Kekkonen, 2014).

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Within the Islamist landscape, a significant number of scholars have preferred focusing on long-established Islamist movements' high cohesion and survival strategies rather than on the potential drivers of factionalism. Doing so has inevitably fostered the image of these movements as highly resilient and almost unbreakable in repressive authoritarian contexts. In this respect, scholarly works have identified several explanatory variables for the high cohesion of Islamist movements and their ability to survive repeated waves of crackdowns. These have included "enforced coherence" (Al-Anani, 2016), socialization processes, control over organizational resources such as internal communication and party finances (Gumuscu, 2023), the presence of a "subculture" of faith, morality, and behavioral codes (McCarthy, 2018: 67), group solidarity, and a widespread sense of "ontological insecurity" among these movement's affiliates (Marks, 2014; Yilmaz and Shipoli, 2022: 324). By contrast, factors that render former Islamist movements vulnerable to factionalism remain largely unexplored.

Excepting Ennahda, scholars have listed ideological divisions (Wagemakers, 2020; Kandil, 2015; Rosmer, 2022), leadership strife (Willi, 2021), generational divides (Samir, 2018), disenchantment with the old guard's organizational vision (Ayyash, ElAfifi, and Ezzat, 2023), and tension caused by deep-seated issues and divergent views on suitable strategies to survive repression (Ardovini, 2022; Al-Anani, 2016) as the prime determinants of factionalism in Islamist and Islamist-born movements. In the case of Ennahda, which has never been a monolith throughout its organizational history (Camau and Geisser, 2003; Gumuscu, 2023), scholars have recently pointed to low levels of intraparty democracy (Sadiki, 2020), a fierce quest for power driven by the ambitions of a few from within the party's upper echelons, and Ghannouchi's monopolizing leadership (Wolf, 2021) as the drivers of the latest episodes of in-group partitioning.

Outside the MENA region, in the context of Indonesian democratization, the high cohesion of religious parties gained through party institutionalization was a key determinant for their political survival, as it facilitated and sustained their leadership's proposals for "controversial" ideological realignments and organizational changes (Hamayotsu, 2011). However, for confessional-born parties, moving towards a more moderate ideological outlook—namely, the center of the ideological spectrum—does not necessarily increase their chances of political survival, meaning that ideological moderation and a higher level of inclusiveness alone do not suffice to expand a support base and guarantee party cohesion. Evidence for this can be found in the case of the Indonesian National Awakening Party (PKB)'s decline after 1999 due to its clientelist relations and organizational fragility (Ibid). Analogous to this is the case of the Moroccan Justice and Development Party (PJD), which lost 90% of its seats in the 2021 elections despite—or perhaps because of—its journey towards moderation (Daadaoui, 2021). Furthermore, the party risked an "implosion" due to the internal party crisis ensuing from the forced replacement of former Prime Minister Abdelilah Benkirane, under pressure from the King, with a less popular PJD figure (Hamid, 2023).

Outside the Muslim world, Christian Democratic parties in Western European countries evolved from "closed, anti-modern confessional parties towards open, modern liberal-conservative parties," incorporating principles of capitalist economics

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in their vision and policies (Lucardie and Napel in Hanley, 1994: 67), in a fashion that is not too dissimilar to that adopted by Ennahda in the post-Uprisings period (Ben Salem, 2020). Some of these parties capitulated to the pressure exerted by internal factions, lobbying groups, and those informal social networks that once represented Christian Democracy's greatest strength (Jones, 2017).

Beyond parties with Muslim or Christian origins, evidence from the Israeli Knesset suggests that party cohesion exhibits the highest degree when parties in coalition governments are called to vote on issues affecting the government's survival and everyday operations but tends to be comparatively lower during voting sessions on matters that define parties' identities, such as the relation between religion and state and national security (Rahat, 2007). In the case of the Likud Party, the electoral victory of 1988 impacted the party's organizational structures significantly, increasing factionalism and intraparty power struggles following the merger with the Liberal Party that brought new factions into the Likud Party. Yet, a condition of low cohesion and coherence produced an organizational change towards "party decentralization" in the aftermath of the 1988 elections and a fairer distribution of power within the Likud (Moshkovich, 2011), showing the positive side of factional politics.

More broadly speaking, the mainstream party politics literature tends to agree that parties occupying the extreme poles of the ideological spectrum exhibit high levels of cohesion (Özbudun, 1970; Bowler et al., 1999). Likewise, those political organizations involved in multi-party coalitions are more likely to retain a high degree of cohesion due to the pressure exerted by the rules of parliamentary governance compared to those parties in opposition (Epstein, 2020; Owens, 2003). Furthermore, a political culture perspective on party cohesion suggests that parties drawing on "collectivistic" rather than "individualistic" theories—a proposition applicable to left-leaning and religious parties alike—also display high levels of party cohesion (Özbudun, 1970; Rahat, 2007). For instance, in the late 19th century, the rise of socialist working-class parties in the West resulted in the emergence of "class-conscious politics" and a high level of polarization that contributed to making parties more socially homogenous, offering party members a "source of solidarity" emanating from identity markers and a sense of belonging to an "in-group" pooled from the same social fabric (Özbudun, 1970). This theoretical proposition is also applicable to Muslim and Christian Democratic parties (Zariski, 1960; 1965). For instance, a roll-call analysis of Italian Christian Democratic deputies' legislative voting between 1946 and 1963 epitomizes how party solidarity was responsible for party discipline among the deputies, even though the party was experiencing a high degree of factionalism to which it eventually succumbed in the mid-1990s (Zariski, 1965). Yet, acting as a unified and disciplined bloc should be viewed as valuable within a parliament as within the party (McAllister, 1991).

Although this strand of party politics literature offers invaluable insights on what determines party cohesion and discipline, particularly inside the legislature, our analysis does not complement this debate on voting cohesion, preferring to capture and derive conceptual insights on the organizational property of combined cohesion and coherence that conditions organizational stability in parties with religious foundations.

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With special reference to Ennahda, a few studies have examined the stage of party transformation and organizational changes required by party professionalization (Marks, 2016; Yildirim, 2017; Ben Salem, 2018; Yerkes, 2018; Meddeb, 2019; Merone, 2019; Brésillon, 2021; Zollner, 2021). However, the long-term organizational repercussions of the specialization motion on its organizational stability did not attract much attention, with the exception of Yerkes (2018), Merone (2019), Brésillon (2021); and Meddeb (2019). Most recently, a pair of studies have paid closer attention to the impact of weak party system institutionalization on autocratization in Tunisia (Mutlu and Yasun, 2024), the "intraparty change" in Ennahda in the post-specialization period, and its effect on the party's structure and identity (McCarthy, 2024). In an attempt to overcome the dearth of scholarly works conducted in this direction, this research article brings focus to the latest organizational developments that unfolded inside Ennahda in the period between the party's Tenth Congress, held in 2016, and July 2021, which marks the end of Ennahda's engagement in Tunisian parliamentary activities and the beginning of its struggle for survival in the context of President Saied's crackdown on Tunisian party politics (Al Jazeera staff, 2022).

Organizational identity, identity work, and factionalism: Re-conceptualizing dynamics of change beyond social movement theory

Following the Arab Uprisings, transformation in Ennahda has often prompted views of change as a consequential and reactive mechanism to a superior pressure, such as fear of exclusion from political processes (Marks, 2014; Marzouki, 2015; McCarthy, 2018) or as a coping mechanism *vis-à-vis* the external environment. In the latter case, an adaptive change functions as a strategic or tactical response (Chamkhi, 2014) to a rapidly evolving external environment and is a "result of either persuasion or coercion" (Al-Anani, 2017). Adaptation implies the gradual acquisition of compromising positions towards "a pragmatic self-restraint in rhetoric and practice" (Wickham, 2013: 11) and an organizational reconfiguration in order to cope with a new environment (Ben Salem, 2018; Dikici Bilgin, 2021). However, theorizing change as an adaptive mechanism inevitably transposes the focus of analysis on macro-level influences—domestic and regional contexts (Cimini and Tomé-Alonso, 2021) and strategic interests as the main triggers, thus downplaying not only the role of individuals but also the organization's embedded dispositions and potentially inherited organizational constraints on change. Accordingly, in the case of Ennahda, the specialization and the subsequent organizational change have been analyzed as a strategic renewal of official discourse in an attempt to become accepted by secular political forces (Affan, 2016; Pfeifer 2019) and to diversify its electorate (Dikici Bilgin, 2021).

In order to overcome the limits of past scholarly approaches to examining "change," this article charts an unexplored path by adopting a meso-level organizational analysis built upon insiders' reflections on Ennahda's specialization and its repercussions while framing change as a non-linear, complex, and negotiated process that is difficult to pursue to completion. While doing so, this article positions Ennahda on the same conceptual level as organizations and institutions. As an organization, Ennahda is considered a goal-oriented group with defined structures

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(i.e., the political organization); as an institution, it embodies enduring systems of beliefs and organized practices (Scott, 2008: 48–49) that comprise symbolic (cultural and cognitive) and material (structural and practical) components, in which the former includes fluid and varying organizational ideas and meanings (Zilber in Greenwood et al., 2008).

Building on an institutional perspective commonly deployed in the field of organization studies, this article recognizes identity and power in individual agency providing that "social actors are key to understand[ing] institutional continuity and change" (Thornton, Ocasio and Lounsbury 2012: 76). Although macro-level influences regularize the behavior of institutions and actors engaging within them, individuals can also be powerful agents capable of "enabling and constraining mechanisms of change" (Ibid: 77).

When change is intended as a process through which organizations vary their practices, goals, and norms, a replacement of old features usually follows shocking and destabilizing events. This process of replacement involves a theorization and justification of the need for new norms and values and their assertion as functionally superior—hence, "pragmatically legitimate"—compared to the pre-existing ones (Greenwood et al., 2002: 60–61). Within this type of institutional change, the theorizing phase includes the specification of perceived "organizational failing" and the introduction and justification of innovative ideas presented as a remedy to those failures (Ibid. 59–60).

In the case of Ennahda, this stage coincided with the party's Tenth Congress, held in 2016, during which its leadership introduced and approved the party's specialization motion (*takhassus*) in the political field as an organizational innovation presented as "necessary" and in harmony with the state of law and liberties present in the country at the time, prior to President Kais Saied's power grab (Ghannouchi, 2017).

In the literature pertinent to this kind of change, "diffusion" follows a successful theorization that, by definition, is a stage wherein ideas become increasingly objectified, "gaining social consensus concerning their pragmatic values" (Greenwood et al., 2002: 61). Yet, for a new organizational idea to become fully institutionalized, it should be embraced not only as a necessary solution in a given time and context but as superior and valuable in itself, thus beyond purely pragmatic grounds (Ibid). In so doing, a novel organizational idea and the attendant recrafted organizational identity will have greater chances to become accommodated and taken for granted by individuals within the organization—the "identity targets"—through a process of identification (Lok, 2010: 1305–1308). Therefore, this article views identification as crucial in both enabling and constraining change.

The concept of "organizational identity" answers the question "who are we as an organization?" by referring to the organization affiliates' perception of the group's "central, distinctive and enduring characteristics" (Bridwell-Mitchell and Mezias, 2012: 191). According to the institutional perspective prevailing within organization studies, the process of affiliates' identification with novel organizational ideas and identities may also trigger "identity work"—a concept that refers to the purposive action of reconstructing and recrafting organizational identities and group ideas through daily actions (Lok, 2010: 1306). In this research, the focus on "identity work"

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counters the tendency in institutional analysis to neglect the effect of agency on institutions. Thus, "identification" assumes the fundamental role of the means through which individuals and collective actors accept, resist, or reject a change process. The act of identification empowers the recipients of change—the "identity targets" within the organization—casting them in the role of change agents rather than as underestimated and passive recipients of organizational change (Lok, 2010).

As anticipated in the literature review section above, high degrees of coherence and cohesion entail the capacity of an institution to overcome internal divisions or disputes and to present itself as a homogenous organization characterized by the absence of splinter groups and episodes of factionalism (Panebianco, 1988). Thus, the degree of system-ness indicates the extent to which political parties are organizational systems by considering the presence of "clearly defined internal structures and developed organizational procedures that are observed closely by the party elite and the rank-and-file membership alike" (Arter and Kestilä-Kekkonen, 2014: 936). Theoretically, members' adherence to the same value system regardless of generational differences accounts for high levels of party coherence, while smooth leadership rotation mechanisms and respect for top-down decisions and deliberative processes are usually indicative of a highly cohesive organization (Randall and Svåsand, 2002).

Low party cohesion and coherence can potentially indicate factionalism and lead to party fragmentation. This article understands factions as "any intraparty combination, clique, or grouping whose members share a sense of common identity and common purpose and are organized to act collectively—as a distinct bloc within the party—to achieve their goals" (Zariski 1960: 33). Hence, party grouping can be based on a shared set of values and affinities derived from common material interests, origins, and functions. Alternatively, it can reflect differences in social composition or choices of clienteles and may be triggered by politics of personal cliques within a party (Ibid). Yet, in-party grouping can be to various extents institutionalized or episodic. Regardless of its typology, factionalism should be viewed as a natural, multifaceted, and adaptive phenomenon about which Western thinkers and Muslim theological writers alike have often displayed a negative bias while overlooking some of its benefits (Boucek, 2009).

While the existence of a formal structure of cooperation among intraparty groups—"cooperative factionalism"—has the potential to broaden party appeal, episodic forms of "competitive factionalism," deriving from deep-seated or newly emerging issues that cannot be easily resolved in the party ideology, can lead to fragmentation and splits (Ibid: 469–479). However, party factions also have the potential to discipline a highly centralized leadership by enabling the rank and file to voice claims within the party when certain lines are crossed (Bowler et al., 1999). Although Panebianco (1988) contends that the prevailing of these voices—critical of some of the party's personalities, its vision, or its policy goals—can endanger party survival, Bowler et al. (1999) and Mezey (1993) maintain that in-party grouping can pressure the leadership to restore deliberation mechanisms within the party or warn it against diluting ideological contents or a grassroots cause to favor a certain electoral strategy or policy.

The remainder of the article pinpoints an inefficient theorization of Ennahda's specialization as the root cause impeding the advancement of a long-initiated process

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of change. Beyond that, the article argues that Ennahda's organizational coherence and cohesion have been negatively impacted as a result of a subsequent ambivalent re-theorization of the specialization as an organizational idea, a process of organizational identity recrafting, and an uneasy cohabitation of distinct organizational identities.

An ineffective theorization of the need for a specialization motion

Ahead of the party's Tenth Congress, Rached Ghannouchi (2016a) announced to the French daily *Le Monde* that,

> We're heading towards [transforming] the party into one which only specializes in political activity. We will exit political Islam and enter Muslim democracy. We're Muslim democrats, and we don't define ourselves as affiliates of "political Islam." We want religious activity to be completely independent from political activity. This is good for politicians because in the future they won't be accused of employing religion to serve political aims. It's also good for religion so it's not held hostage to politics, and thus it's not employed by politicians.[5]

A few days later, he reiterated the same message in a press release to the Western audience of *Foreign Affairs*, stressing that "there is no longer need for political Islam in Tunisia" (Ghannouchi, 2016a; 2016b). Ghannouchi rationalized the rupture with political Islam to the public as necessary and functional in the light of changed circumstances, which required the party to normalize its position based on the 2014 constitutional text, explaining that the "Tunisian society is already Muslim and has recovered its Arabic-Islamic heritage."[6] Thus, he did not justify the need for endorsing the specialization as the best option or as something valuable in its own right, independent of regional concerns and domestic political developments.

As Ennahda's founder and leader had publicly stated, following the approval of the 2014 Constitution, there was no longer any need for political Islam, since the Islamic character of Tunisian society was no longer at stake (Ghannouchi, 2017). The overall formal change consecrated by the public announcement of Ennahda's exclusive existence as "a civil party of Muslim democrats" in 2016 functioned to normalize its position in the Tunisian political system. In addition, in the leadership's view, the specialization in politics and the change towards a modern party "confirmed the political nature of Ennahda" and subtly attempted to defuse the criticism made of the cross-ideological collaboration and ambivalent conduct during its political experience.[7] As a senior Ennahda member underlined during an interview with the lead author:

> There were opportunities for a pluralistic type of political action and engagement in power and state institutions without any exclusion, and this strengthened the option of separation (*fasl*) and specialization (*takhassus*).[8]

Internally, the specialization was also envisioned to assume the tactical function of further homogenizing the party by sidelining more intransigent and religious-oriented figures who represented the voices most critical of Ennahda's compromising attitude

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and its exit from political Islam (Ben Salem, 2018b). Furthermore, the officialization of this division of labor between politics and *daʿwa* (educational work and proselytization) also embodied an attempt to avoid any juxtaposition with the regionally banned Muslim Brotherhood (Meddeb, 2019). Undeniably, it enhanced the party's professionalism, while focusing exclusively on operating in the political sphere. In addition to that, it clarified to the public that the party no longer occupied the associative sphere through which it provided for the disadvantaged strata of Tunisian society.[9]

The specialization achieved a broad consensus of approval within Ennahda's organs, and interviewees from the party continued to value it as a "necessary change" years later, despite having led Ennahda to override and refashion its organizational identity as a "civil party of Muslim democrats."[10] The vast majority of them continued to justify the need for specialization in line with Ghannouchi's public theorization. They framed it as "a necessity" resulting from Tunisian peculiarities, explained as a means of conforming with the 2014 Constitution and the post-Uprisings political reality of Tunisia, and "as a means for the party to open up and enlarge its constituency."[11] This suggests that Ennahda's leadership depicted the specialization as a necessary change not only while addressing foreign media but also when justifying the need for such a significant organizational change to its rank and file.

However, when asked about the meaning and significance of the specialization motion, interviewees neither described it as an organizational change that was valuable in itself, independent of the specific context that called for its adoption, nor did they view it as a permanent change that was beyond the scope of interrogation and re-evaluation. As one of the party's key leaders admitted to the lead author in September 2020, the specialization was not intended as an irreversible change. Rather, it was supposed to undergo a reassessment on the occasion of the Eleventh Party Congress:

> In the next [postponed Eleventh] Congress, we will make an assessment and an evaluation of the separation between social, religious, and cultural activities [and] from what is merely political, whether or not we have been successful [in the specialization], whether to continue and which political force we'll be aligned with.[12]

The specialization and its implications were due to be subject to a thorough re-evaluation and further assessment that could have reversed the direction of this change process undertaken by the party. This means that prior to the dissolution of the People's Assembly by the Tunisian President in July 2021 (Yerkes and Alhomoud, 2022), the specialization had not yet been endorsed uncritically as the definitive driver of the party's behavior. This was because it was still being partially questioned owing to an inefficient theorization, which, in turn, triggered an ambivalent re-theorization of its prime meaning by Ennahda's top and mid-rank members alike.

In this respect, two major themes emerged from the thematic analysis of interview data concerning the significance of the specialization four years later (2020). In stark contrast to the bold view that Ghannouchi expressed in his public addresses in 2016, in which he framed the specialization as a rupture with or the exit from political Islam,

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others within the party did not appear to conceive it in this way (Ghannouchi, 2016b). Indeed, some senior leaders alluded to Ennahda's specialization as a "change of small dimensions,"[13] providing that the introduction of specialization as a new organizational value was not initially conceived as a means of dropping its ideological references to Islam immediately.[14] The specialization motion endorsed in 2016 provided an answer to the discussion on the link between *daʿwa* and *siyasa* (politics) that can be traced back to the late 1980s.[15] On the occasion of the Tenth Congress:

> We [Ennahda] decided to get out of the rigid categorization between the ideological and political. We said NO, a political party can have an ideological foundation regardless of its type, but we can specify our work.[16]

This quotation indicates that the integration of specialization as a new organizational value functioned as a mechanism to subtly retain the reference to Islam rather than sidelining it or reducing it to a broad framework of ethical values, by resorting to the specification of the party's work and activities.

By contrast, to others, particularly to party newcomers in their 30s and early 40s who joined Ennahda after 2011 and 2016, the specialization decreed the party's first stage of an ongoing secularizing process at the culmination of which the party will become more inclusive and diverse, "a process that should be pushed further."[17] Likewise, a mid-ranking member who joined the party after 2016 and was a member of the parliamentary bloc substantiated the same view by stating that,

> I don't think that our way of governing the country, considering the types of bills we proposed in the parliament, taxation policies or decisions, is any longer religious-driven [. . .].[18]

Although Ennahda's specialization in politics has been theorized as a prerequisite for the party to enter Tunisian domestic politics and as a "functionally superior" organizational innovation, hence based on pragmatic considerations, a broad acceptance of new organizational ideas and practices only occurs once they are internalized as valuable and meaningful in themselves (Greenwood et al., 2002: 61). In this case, ideas will be imitated and survive across generations because they are recognized as "cognitively legitimate" (Bridwell-Mitchell and Mezias 2012: 196). In contrast, Ennahda's case illustrates the inadequacy and insufficiency of theorizing change only as necessary and functional to fit in a particular domestic context rather than as a valuable and meaningful option in the long term. In this case, the adoption of new practices and organizational values presented as "pragmatically legitimate" was not sufficient to guarantee their broad acceptance (Greenwood et al., 2002: 60–61). Indeed, as the remainder of this article shows, an ineffective theorization of the need for change can foster resistance and even a rerouting of the direction of change once members perceive the need for organizational change as contextual to certain circumstances that might be on the verge of changing again.

However, there is another organizational factor that might account for the inefficacy of Ghannouchi's theorization of Ennahda's specialization motion. Some official members maintain that the specialization was proposed and endorsed from the

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bottom up, starting with the local congresses, which is partly accurate. However, a former Ennahda member and employee involved in the organization of the regional congresses maintained that "not enough time was dedicated to the discussion of some themes, including the specialization." Instead, the local and regional congresses had a passive role in debating the specialization motion, since members were primarily asked to vote for those themes, not discuss them.[19] Perhaps, to some extent, part of Ennahda's rank and file perceived the specialization motion as having been imposed in a top-down fashion as an organizational practice already decided upon and endorsed by the leadership.

While reflecting on Ennahda's ultimate destination in its long-initiated transformation into a secular political party that culminated in its specialization in political activities, interviewees from within the party tend to agree that,

> the change is not yet complete. Ennahda is still in the process of becoming a demo-conservative party, which is the product of a changing [party] culture where the religious reference and the ideological background are destined to vanish gradually.[20]

Most likely, this transformation phase has now been put on hold, owing to the regression to authoritarianism affecting the country's institutions (Souilmi, 2023). However, more than simply appearing incomplete, Ennahda's change process seems to be halted from inside its organizational apparatus. Despite the majority of interviewees recognizing the necessity of the specialization motion, interview data indicate that not all of them could identify with the "civil party of Muslim democrats" that the specialization produced.

As the remainder of this article illustrates, an ambivalent re-theorization of the meaning and rationale behind the specialization signposts a non-homogenous identification of Nahdawis with the official organizational identity of the "civil party of Muslim democrats" and the existence of distinct organizational identities that impacted the overall system-ness of the Party of Ennahda Movement.

The role of identity targets in affecting change

A recurring theme within the interview data refers to Ennahda in the post-specialization period as a party encompassing three main generations of members. The first corresponds to an older generation who used to be devout to *daʿwa*-related activities and were responsible for the religious education of new affiliates. The second generation comprises members and current leaders who were active in the student movement, unions, and human rights advocacy. Lately, a new group of members has emerged as a direct result of the Uprisings and the specialization. This includes both the sons and daughters of, or individuals with family ties to, those two older generations, whose ideological attachment to Islam is diluted and loose compared to that of their parents, and a small clique of younger and non-observant conservative members who joined the party after 2011 and 2016 (Merone, 2019; Meddeb 2019). Following the specialization and the evolution of the Tunisian political scene, the first two generations' roles no longer needed to be fulfilled. Despite that, a senior Ennahda

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member lamented that some of those members still occupied influential positions within the party.[21]

Primarily, the re-branded identity of the "party of Muslim democrats" is resisted by internal identity targets.

The first category of internal identity targets includes senior top- and mid-ranking leaders who belong to the first two generations. In this regard, an explicative theme that emerged from the interview data points to a subtle identification by current party cadres within this category of members with the old role of the movement as a defender of the country's Islamic identity, albeit back then protected by the 2014 Constitution. For instance, a senior leader within the Executive Bureau, who joined the movement in the 1980s while a university student, explained to the lead author that,

> the party will preserve its ideological reference to Islam, until the time our civil society becomes fully independent from political agencies and the state-organs, and the rule of law becomes a custom and etiquette within our society in a Khaldunian sense [. . .].[22]

According to interviewees who expressed similar sentiments to the lead author of this article, in late 2020 Tunisia had yet to reach a final stage of state evolution in which the 2014 Constitution and the country's post-revolutionary legal framework would gain full social acceptability and political legitimacy, as per Ibn Khaldun's vision.[23] This type of statement sheds light on the fact that even amongst the party's senior members, there are leaders who still confer on the movement the role of protector of Tunisian Islamic identity "because the 2014 Constitution, the rule of law and the independence of civil society are yet to be secured"—an assessment that proved to be warranted once President Saied proceeded to replace it one year after dissolving the People's Assembly.[24] This understated identification of Ennahda's members with the organizational identity of the old Islamist movement functioned as a subtle form of resistance to the process of change—prompted by the specialization—towards a party of national or democratic-conservatives.

Likewise, one of Ennahda's founding fathers emphasized a similar point in an interview with the lead author, alluding to Ennahda's specialization as a change of "small dimensions" because,

> we are now interested in the relations with state power based on a legal system and an Islamic regime that is democratic, and what concerns us is that no one can put in place an anti-Islamic system.[25]

These words indicate that Ennahda's role is, in the estimation of some interviewees, still serving the old cause in line with its pre-existing organizational identity of defender of the Arab-Islamic heritage of Tunisia. Moreover, related sub-themes portend a problematic identification with the re-branded party of Muslim democrats, exemplified by subtle acts discrediting and de-valuing the party's new practices, its post-specialization conduct, and the specialization's outcomes. While some participants expressed nostalgia for the old social project, others alluded to a causal

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relation between an increase of "*amrad ijtimaʿiyya*" ("social pathologies," namely crimes, drug abuse, or "degenerate" customs) in Tunisia and Ennahda's specialization motion of 2016.[26] Among this group, sub-themes include complaints that "the abandonment of Ennahda's social project has led us [Tunisians] to live in a period of disarray in terms of religious identity, one that has paved the way for a more dangerous interpretation of Islam to prevail among the youth."[27]

This category of senior members also includes Y.N. who, although currently engaging in civil society rather than the party's activities, still defines Ennahda's religious reference to Islam in terms closer to those of the old Islamist movement. In his own words:

> There is no doubt that Ennahda is an Islamic party with a specific perspective and vision that renews and develops Islamic thought and religious practice by opening up to human experiences.[28]

As of July 2021, members falling under this category of identity targets attempted to subtly revive the movement's old logic of operation, which framed political activism and grassroots *daʿwa* activity as co-existing. This entails the pursuit of a broad social and ethical project along with its associated identity markers, at odds with the new group identification as a more narrowly defined political party, according to which Islamic *daʿwa* is no longer considered a political activity (Sigillò, 2020). Instead, Y.N. believes that "Ennahda abandoned the advocacy field, but not the Islamic *daʿwa.*"[29] For instance, in their indirect attempt to resist the transformative change that the party was still experiencing, these members voiced resentment at the absence of educational work that, in their estimation, could have rendered counterterrorist approaches more effective than the securitization policies that were in fact implemented by the post-revolutionary political elite. Furthermore, they expressed their disapproval of the party leadership's prolonged cross-ideological collaboration with the *ancien régime* elites and political concessions that compromised the party's value system, which ultimately had the effect of alienating and sidelining the movement's base, rather than producing the desired effect of enlarging its constituency.[30]

By contrast, the second category of internal identity targets comprises a small group belonging to Ennahda's latest generation of less religious newcomers and non-observant members who joined the party following the Uprisings. In this category, the problematic identification of Nahdawis has also contributed to stalling the process of change. For instance, J.S.—an MP who describes himself as far from resembling the "classic Nahdawi"—struggles to identify his persona with the party of Muslim democrats simply because he has "a conservative profile but not a religious one."[31] In addition, he highlighted in conversation with the lead author that he personally has no substantial family ties to the old movement. While being part of the parliamentary bloc, he refers to Ennahda's politics as secularized, wishing the party would move forward and include more conservative figures like himself:

> Frankly, I think we manage politics in a conservative way but not in a religious one, that's why the changes must be enhanced, and the leadership should allow

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> us to open ourselves to a larger majority of Tunisians who are mostly conservative, but not strictly in the religious sense.[32]

Enthusiastically, a younger member sees Ennahda as a party involved in a process of secularization that "has put religion aside and given total importance to political life," as a political organization in which "a new generation of hard-working members will be the drivers to open it up and secularize it further."[33] Along similar lines, another younger participant identifies themselves as part of a party based on "coalition and dialogue" committed to reuniting the variegated trends present in Tunisian youth rather than dividing along ideological lines.[34] This category of recipients of change is projecting Ennahda as a secular, or at the minimum quasi-secular party, thus distancing it from the views expressed by the category of affiliates reported above.

Aside from Ennahda's senior members and party newcomers, the third category of identity targets comprises Ennahda's grassroots and electoral support, namely the Islamist base. According to a female Ennahda MP, within this category, there is a large segment of Ennahda supporters "who want us to keep the religious label as if we are neglecting the religious dimension in our programs or as if we have given up the practices of Islam."[35] This is because they still identify themselves with Ennahda as a movement devoted to defending the Islamic identity of the country and committed to a broader social project.

In a written communication with the lead author, Hager, a young university student representative of Ennahda's grassroots, accused Ennahda's leadership of prolonged collaboration with forces eager to annihilate the party and of remaining exclusively focused on survival, while neglecting its identity as an oppositional and morally superior movement, and of betraying its base. In her words:

> The transformation from an Islamist movement to a democratic party was of no use [. . .] the party seeks societal acceptability by denying itself, and this is a loss for the movement [. . .] Revisions are required, but this change has blown up the movement. Politically, this transformation opened the door for the party to communicate with all components of the political scene, but internally, the value system that shaped the movement was shaken.[36]

Sidelining the old logic of the movement and its identity markers, which were once aligned with Ennahda's value system, has created the image of a party trying to deny its essence—a reason for its electoral decline according to the interviewee. Within only eight years following the political opening brought about by the Uprisings, Ennahda's support fell from 1,500,000 voters to approximately 500,000 (Sigma Conseil, 2021). Although Ennahda's rapid electoral decline must be read in the context of the crisis of Tunisian party politics (Wolf, 2019), its core voters, who in the post-Uprisings period supported the party for embodying an oppositional and non-corrupted movement critical of the old establishment, became disillusioned with Ennahda and likely stopped backing the party after its coalition with Nidaa Tounes (Yerkes, 2018; Grewal 2018; Gumuscu, 2023). Similarly, following the progressive rolling back of its religious references, some of Ennahda's supporters may have ceased to identify themselves with a party deprived of its religious appeal. Although a nucleus of historical supporters

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with emotional and family ties to the old movement may continue to support the party, Ennahda is increasingly dependent on the Islamist electoral reservoir—its "electorate of belonging" that still partakes in the party's "subculture" (Panebianco, 1988: 25; McCarthy, 2018: 67)—not only for its political survival but also for its very existence and for the safety of its leaders in the context of President Saied's crackdown on the what is left of the Tunisian opposition (Sebei and Fulco, 2022).

More than 10 years on: The ultimate imprint of identity recrafting on Ennahda's system-ness

The non-homogenous identification with the party of Muslim democrats has not only contributed to stalling the change process but has also had the effect of redirecting the party on different paths. Data collected between 2020 and 2021 indicate that its internal identity targets also function as agents of change as they triggered a process of organizational identity recrafting, driven by their self-perception based on their affiliation to Ennahda. In theory, organizational identity recrafting is "a sense-giving strategy," devised to render organizational changes and endeavors more meaningful and understandable (Bridwell-Mitchell and Mezias 2012: 196).

Conversely, the case of Ennahda shows that internal identity targets have contributed to hindering its change process by not identifying with the new organizational identity of Muslim democrats in the post-specialization period. Thus, members are able to resist change despite adopting distinct perspectives and coming from various generations and backgrounds.

The lack of identification with the newly refashioned organizational identity corresponds to an act of resistance from some of the most senior members, who look with nostalgia to the old Islamist movement, or who disagree on principle with the move toward secularization, and from younger and new affiliates, who joined the party in the post-2011 and 2016 and who long to become part of a national conservative party. Beyond that, internal identity targets are rerouting the direction of change by recrafting divergent organizational identities within the party as final destinations, hence generating indecision and confusion regarding the image that Ennahda intends to project to the public.

As evidence of that, when interviewees were asked to define Ennahda, dissonant voices emerged from within. Among the elite of top- and middle-rank leaders, there are members who refer to Ennahda as "a civil party of Muslim democrats," unhesitatingly endorsing Ghannouchi's proposed label. Direct challengers of this label are non-devotee conservative members who cannot naturally identify themselves with the party of Muslim democrats. For instance, J.S. admits that,

> Ennahda's way of doing politics is completely secularized; I can't see anything related to religion with the bills that we propose in the parliament. *De facto*, we are a party of national conservatives.[37]

Along similar lines, some younger members who joined the party in the post-Uprisings period, and who do not share the same religious and emotional ties to Ennahda as their parents' generation, refer to it as a secular party. For example, M.Z.

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contends that "Ennahda is a secular party that only keeps religious values like freedom, equality, and respect that are common to all national and conservative parties."[38] In this and other similar views, there is a tendency to drop the Islamic reference and a will to recast the change process towards becoming a national and demo-conservative party "not in the ideological sense, but in the social one to attract larger strata from the Tunisian social fabric, which comprise socially conservative people."[39] Likewise, as mentioned earlier, younger members tend to see in Ennahda "a national party based on coalition and dialogue capable of uniting ideologically diverse Tunisian youth."[40] In contrast, some senior members and leaders refer to Ennahda in the post-specialization period "as a political party that frames its vision in the same intellectual base that promotes the Arab-Islamic identity"[41] or a "party that preserves its Islamic roots."[42]

This case study of Ennahda shows the impossibility of drawing a clear-cut line between social identities defined as the perception of the self, based on affiliation to the party, and the organizational identity theorized as the answer to the question, "who are we as an organization?" This is because, following the specialization and the subsequent membership and recruitment changes, the former naturally impacted the latter. Although identification does not impact party sustainability, it remains crucial to confer cognitive legitimacy on planned organizational changes. Hence, it corresponds to the root cause of the stalled transition within Ennahda.

Years on since the specialization, Ennahda means different things to different members. Consequently, the organization has found itself stuck in a limbo of divergent group identities that compromise the party's *ijmaʿ* (internal consensus) and its *wihda* (cohesion or unity) and had confused the image of the movement in the eyes of both its old supporters and a potential new electorate. The premises for the internal consensus of the movement have changed, as evidenced by the critical and disappointed views that the interviewees shared with the lead author. This included views about Ghannouchi's conduct and his initial decision, endorsed by his clique back in 2020, to retain his position as Ennahda's president, regardless of Article 31 of Ennahda's statute which limits the party's presidential mandates to a maximum of two consecutive terms (Ghannouchi, 2020).

On this occasion, the issue of power rotation resulted in an overt challenge to the current president posed by a group of 100 leaders who demanded that Ghannouchi declare his unwillingness to stand again as a candidate for the party's leadership, as a precondition before convening the next Congress (100 Ennahda leaders, 2020). The correspondence consisted of three letters leaked to the media (September–October 2020) at the end of which, after heavy pressure and the inherent risk of party fragmentation, Ghannouchi announced that he would not propose modifications to the party's statutes to remain in power and he would respect the principle of *tadawul* (leadership rotation) (Watanya Replay 2020). While to some participants, the dispute simply mirrored a fierce quest for power triggered by the personal ambitions of a few—Abdul Latif al-Makki and his followers in particular[43]—to others, it casts light on the low cohesion characterizing Ennahda on the eve of Saied's power grab.

Based on the content of the letter signed by the "100 leaders," the controversy signaled the need for generational transition in the party's leadership, a firm rejection

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of the "personalization of power," and an eagerness to move Ennahda's stalled change process forward. According to the letter, respecting the principles of leadership rotation would demonstrate Ennahda's commitment to test their democratic credentials within their own political organization (100 Ennahda leaders, 2020). On this occasion, the formation of a bloc critical of Ghannouchi's conduct that had to resort to leaking a heated correspondence in order to have their voices heard—an act of insubordination exhibiting low discipline—highlights the dysfunctionality or lack of intraparty deliberation mechanisms within Ennahda (Sadiki, 2020). This bloc's coordinated actions and its success in pressurizing Ghannouchi to respect the party's mechanisms of leadership rotation also show the disciplinary function of factional politics and its ability to partially restore intraparty democracy in highly centralized organizations (Bowler et al., 1999). Perhaps the act of re-theorizing the meaning of the specialization motion served a similar function: it warned Ennahda's leadership against abruptly dropping the ideological references to Islam and its grassroots cause.

After the specialization and a decade of consensual politics, Ennahda's history of ordeals, retaining Islam as an emotional tie, and the old "dissident subculture built around identity, faith, and behavior" can no longer homogenize the movement (McCarthy, 2018), although they most likely remain bonding elements to some long-term leaders (Bajec, 2023). The uneasy coexistence of discordant group identities and the ongoing recrafting of organizational identities rendered Ennahda neither distinguishable nor trustworthy to the party's voters and the new electoral constituency that it hoped to attract before Saied's presidential coup.

Concluding remarks

The case study of Ennahda illustrates that its transition into a civil party of Muslim democrats was doomed to stall once its specialization in political activities became theorized as merely necessary, rather than valuable in itself, and it remained accommodated as such in the long term. Consequently, a homogenous identification of Nahdawis with the organizational idea of a party of Muslim democrats did not follow. Yet, the recipients of change within the party acted not only as the major factors of resistance. They proved their ability to simultaneously assume the function of change agents by de-valuing the new practices' efficiency and the party's conduct and, most significantly, by recrafting different organizational identities for the party.

Based on these considerations, after its national breakthrough and a significant organizational change, an Islamist-born party was shown to experience low systemness owing to: i) an ineffective justification of the need for change, ii) a problematic identification with a refashioned organizational identity, and iii) an uneasy coexistence of distinct group identities.

Although the theory on organizational change employed in this study contends that if new organizational ideas gain growing social consensus regarding their pragmatic value, then they are likely to successfully diffuse (Greenwood et al., 2002), the case study of Ennahda urges scholars to rethink the way we frame "change" in religious parties—not necessarily only in Islamist groups. A change process should not be framed myopically as a linear one (Larkin and Nasasra, 2021) inevitably leading to a finite product that is different from the starting point. Indeed, this can be a partial

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and stalled process, (re)-negotiated by identity targets, and arduous to partake in until the end. A planned change process, theorized as necessary rather than inherently valuable, is unlikely to gain cognitive legitimacy if the receivers of change turn into change agents, rerouting the transformative process in different directions and recrafting an already "refashioned organizational identity," as the case of Ennahda illustrates.

This article's key findings also contend that, over a decade since the Arab Uprisings, Ennahda no longer resembles a homogenous party but a party searching for new meanings in which diversely constructed group ideas cohabit uneasily. However, in the post-July 2021 order—hence, beyond the timeframe adopted in this study—group survival against the threats posed by a common enemy—Kais Saied—might perhaps not only glue Ennahda's factions together but also re-attract its disillusioned former supporters despite the mass resignation of more than 100 leaders from the party's Shura Council, and regional and local offices in the aftermath of President Saied's power grab (Amara, 2021).

Beyond Ennahda, this article's findings offer three conceptual insights for religious-born or -inspired parties. First, parties undergoing significant organizational change indeed may potentially diversify the party's constituency and increase their appeal (Boucek, 2009) through the coexistence of different groups of party members: "true believers"—whose affiliation with the party relies mostly on the distribution of collective incentives of identity—and "careerists"—whose participation depends more on selective and material incentives (Panebianco, 1988). However, also equally likely is for this to blur the party's organizational identity, thus confusing both old and potentially new voters alike, as in the case of Ennahda.

Second, group solidarity and informal networks do not always suffice to hold a pre-existing movement and political party together after opening up to new party profiles and social classes, especially following the overriding of its defining organizational identity.

Third, this study's findings urge scholars to rethink coherence and cohesion in more dynamic terms. These are not merely static organizational properties or quantifiable descriptors (Bowler et al., 1999). On the contrary, combined low coherence and cohesion can translate to highly dynamic, contested, and instrumental processes aimed at purposefully disrupting party system-ness, triggering in-group partitioning. In highly hierarchical political parties, low system-ness may in fact indicate an agentic function intended to warn and discipline a longstanding and monopolizing leadership, as exemplified by the "letter from 100 leaders" in the case of Ennahda.

Furthermore, the adoption of an organizational lens in combination with concepts borrowed from the field of party politics corroborates Gumuscu's view on intraparty politics being a primary factor determining the pathways of Islamist parties (Gumuscu, 2023). Ultimately, pertinent to the studies on "change" within the Islamist landscape, placing the emphasis on organizational dynamics has the potential to contribute to de-ideologizing the literature on these movements by transcending the ideological and behavioral moderation-inclusion premise, and freeing them from the "post-Islamist turn" (Bayat, 2013) that tends to deprive both Islamist and Islamist-

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born movements of agency as a result of the purported uncontrolled exhaustion of the Islamist project (Daadaoui, 2021).

Competing interests. The authors have no conflicting interests to report.

Notes

1 We consider Islamist-born parties those organizations that have originated as Islamist movements which have since publicly reframed themselves as specialized exclusively in political activities, as in the cases of the Turkish Justice and Development Party (AKP) and Ennahda.
2 This study received ethical clearance from the University of Otago's Human Ethics Committee on 29 October 2019 (ref. numb 19/136). Due to the fast-evolving political development taking place in Tunisia following the President's power grab in July 2021, the authors decided to ensure full anonymity for all interviewees. In this article, the initials used to conceal interviewees' identities do not reflect real names.
3 In this qualitative study, 7 interviewees are categorized as (i) core supporters; 8 interviewees belong to the (ii) mid-ranking leaders, and 7 to the (iii) higher-ranking leaders of Ennahda.
4 More recently, Huntington's four-dimension model has been amended and reproduced by Vicky Randall and Lars Svåsand, "Party institutionalization in new democracies," *Party Politics* 8, no. 1 (2002), 10–14.
5 Rached Ghannouchi, "Il n'y a plus de justification a l'Islam politique en Tunisie," *Le Monde*, May 18, 2016a. https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2016/05/19/rached-ghannouchi-il-n-y-a-plus-de-justification-a-l-islam-politique-en-tunisie_4921904_3210.html.
6 Rached Ghannouchi, "Rashid Ghannushi," interview by M. Uthman Alanjari, *Power Owners*, February 28, 2017, www.youtube.com/watch?v = sEG3bfc495s. In the 2014 Constitution, article 1 defines Islam as the religion of Tunisia despite its civil nature, decreed in article 2. Article 6 assigns the Tunisian state the task of 'guardian of religion' and Article 39 refers to the consolidation of the 'Arab-Muslim identity of the country and the national belonging in the young generation'. See the 2014 Tunisia's Constitution, *Constitute Project* (2014). https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Tunisia_2014.pdf.
7 Online interview with R.S., Ennahda's senior member and a former minister, August 27, 2020.
8 Ibid.
9 About Ennahda's specialization, see also Intissar Kherigi, "Ennahdha's separation of the religious and the political: A historic change or a risky maneuver?," Al Sharq Forum (2017), 6–8. https://research.sharqforum.org/2016/09/08/ennahdhas-separation-of-the-religious-and-the-political-a-historic-change-or-a-risky-maneuver/.
10 Precisely 80.8% of members voted in favor of the specialization motion in Ibid.
11 Online interview with a former female Ennahda's representative and member of the Constituent Assembly, August 22, 2020.
12 Online interview with S.L., one of Ennahda's female leaders and former member of the Constituent Assembly, September 20, 2020.
13 Online interview with W.M., one of Ennahda's long-term leaders and founders, September 9, 2020.
14 Ibid.
15 This information was not only shared by some interviewees in their late 50s but also confirmed by the in-progress online archive available on Ennahda from which the lead author consulted an official document of the movement mentioning the issue of specialization referred to in Arabic as 'tamyiz' (differentiation). See Harakat al-Nahda, *Al-Mudhakkira al-'Amma: Al-tawajahat al-kubra li-l-marhala*, (1999). Last accessed on November 30, 2024. https://bit.ly/3ZTvc8i
16 Online interview with T.G., a former Tunisian minister and a current member of Ennahda's Executive Bureau. October 23, 2020.
17 Online interview with R.T., a young Ennahda member and former advisor to the Minister of Infrastructure, September 10, 2020.
18 Online interview with J.S., an Ennahda MP who joined the Party following the Uprisings, September 11, 2020.
19 Online interview with Y.D., a young former member and Ennahda Shura Council employee with family ties to the pre-2011 movement, December 1, 2020.

20 Online interview with T.G., a former Tunisian minister and a current member of Ennahda's Executive Bureau, October 23, 2020.
21 Online interview with A.M., a senior member of Ennahda's Parliamentary bloc, September 12, 2020.
22 Online interview with T.G., a former Tunisian minister and a current member of Ennahda's Executive Bureau.
23 Abd al-Rahman Ibn Muhammad Ibn Khaldun is an influential Tunis-born historian, philosopher, sociologist, and scholar (1332–1406), best known for his historical masterpiece *Kitab al-'Ibar* (The Book of Lessons), and more specifically its theoretical introduction *Al-Muqaddima* (The Introduction).
24 Online interview with T.G., a former Tunisian minister and a current member of Ennahda's Executive Bureau.
25 Online interview with W.M., one of Ennahda's long-term leaders and founders.
26 Online interview with T.M., a senior member of Ennahda's Executive Bureau, September 15, 2020.
27 Online interview with S.M., one of the former party president's advisors living abroad, September 4, 2020.
28 Online interview with Y.N., Ennahda's human rights activist, July 20, 2020.
29 Ibid.
30 Online interview with S.M., one of the former party president's advisors living abroad. Online interview with Y. N., Ennahda's human rights activist.
31 Online interview with J.S., an Ennahda MP who joined the Party following the Uprisings.
32 Ibid.
33 Online interview with M.Z., a young Ennahda member and former advisor to the Minister of International Cooperation, September 8, 2020.
34 Online interview with E. S., a young Ennahda member from Gafsa's regional office, October 17, 2020.
35 Online interview with S.L., one of Ennahda's female leaders who used to be part of Ennahda's parliamentary bloc.
36 Online interview with Hager, a member of Ennahda's student section, September 3, 2020.
37 Online interview with J.S., an Ennahda MP who joined the Party following the Uprisings.
38 Online interview with M.Z., a young Ennahda member and former advisor to the Minister of International Cooperation.
39 Online interview with A.M., a senior member previously part of Ennahda's parliamentary bloc, September 12, 2020.
40 Online interview with M.T., a young Ennahda member and former advisor to the Minister of Infrastructure.
41 Online interview with R.S., an Ennahda senior member and former minister.
42 Online interview with T.G., former Minister and a current member of Ennahda's Executive Bureau.
43 Abdellatif al-Makki was the Head of Ennahda and minister of Public Health in Ilyas Fakhfakh's government (Feb 2020–Sept 2020).

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