Motives to Moderate
The Tunisian Ennahda Party and its breaking with Political Islam

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Introduction

The spring of 2016, in the light of its upcoming Tenth National Conference, the Tunisian Ennahda Party announced its move away from political Islam – towards what they call democratic Islam. The party presented its new identity as a National Democratic party based on Muslim Values. Party President Rached El Ghannouchi stated that political Islam no longer is relevant in the Tunisian context, and that they from now on would specialize in politics, focusing on matters important for Tunisia’s progress, and all Tunisians.¹ This study examines what motivated this break with Political Islam.

According to the theoretical paradigm on party moderation, inclusion in democratic systems can drive radical parties to move away from radical practices and moderate their positions. Parties are traditionally presented as oligarchic organizations where the leaders prioritize political survival over ideology.² Early studies of this theory were focused on radical socialist parties, who, as they integrated in the system realized that they excluded important parts of the electorate, causing them to become more moderate in their policies.³ As the inclusion-moderation hypothesis was applied to Islamist parties, however, the assumption of parties being purely tactical was questioned. Much focus in this paradigm has been put on the causal mechanism behind moderation, and the distinction between moderation as a result of ideological evolvement and moderation for tactical reasons. Tactical moderation in the case of Islamist parties has often been treated as moderation as a means to implement an Islamist agenda, with little or no genuine commitment to democratic values.

In a study of Ennahda’s moderation during Tunisia’s constitutional process, however, Kasper Ly Netterstrøm showed that moderation as a result of tactical reasoning can in turn lead to ideological moderation, in this case because the new ideas were implemented from above by party leaders.⁴ Netterstrøm also predicted that this was a first step for Ennahda towards becoming a more conventional, conservative party, and that Islam would likely be referenced to in terms of identity politics in the future. He also stated that it would have to appeal to centrist voters in order to perform well in coming elections.⁵ In studying the Ennahda’s recent transformation from an Islamist party to a Muslim Democratic party, these hypotheses will be

² Tezcur, p.71, 2010
³ Ibid.
⁴ Netterstrøm, p.119, 2015
⁵ Ibid, p.123
tested. This study also examines the role played by extremist groups present in the societies that Islamist parties act in. As more and less extremist voices within Islam compete for power and truth, radical groups will affect the political climate, and therefore affect the incentive for Islamist parties to moderate.

By using qualitative content analysis on primary sources from the Ennahda Party and party leaders, common themes, topics and arguments have been examined. The result shows that the Ennahda aims to become an important party in the Tunisian political field, both as a representative for democratic Islam and important actor in combating extremism, and as an open, centrist, national party. There is little in the motives for breaking with political Islam that contradicts the tactical interest of the party. In the content analyzed, it is clear that the party leaders’ religious and political authority have been used to frame the transformation as logical to members, which indicates that the moderation has come from above. However, the presence of internal dialogue and the fact that the party has identified the pluralist democratic system as preferable indicates political learning and ideological moderation.

The conclusion made is that the process of tactical and ideological moderation cannot always be seen as separate processes, but as mutually reinforcing. Furthermore, the party’s efforts to emphasize its positive role in reconciling Islam and democracy, as well as combating extremism, indicates that extremist Islamist groups indeed can increase the incentives for parties in democratic systems to move away from radical positions. These conclusions confirms Netterstrøm’s hypotheses, brings more light upon the mechanisms behind Islamist party moderation, while also lifting the importance of looking at contextual factors in the societies within which Islamist parties act.

The structure of the thesis will be as follows: Firstly, the theoretical background on party behavior and moderation theory will be presented. Then the case of the Ennahda Party in Tunisia is presented and motivated for. Thereafter the methodology of the study is presented and discussed, followed by the presentation of the material used in the study. In the following analysis, the two main motives discerned in the material are presented in separate sections: Becoming the necessary voice of moderate and democratic Islam, and becoming an open national party for all Tunisians. The analysis is followed by a discussion where the conclusions are presented.
Theoretical background

Moderation theory seeks to explain how and why radical parties moderate their radical practices and policies and become integrated into the political system. It aims to outline the process of party moderation, the circumstances favorable to it, and the mechanisms behind it. The following section will present an overview of this theoretical field, and how it relates to the research question. First the general theory on party behavior and party moderation will be presented, followed by the literature on Islamist parties, and lastly the contributions of this thesis to the theoretical field.

Party goals and moderation

Robert Michels laid the foundation for this theory in his work “Political parties”, where he examined organizational structures of parties, stating that moderation is a result of vote pursuing and looking after organizational survival. Michels found that revolutionary socialist parties realized when taking part in electoral contest that their radical stand excluded important parts of the electorate – which resulted in the parties’ moderating. Parties, to Michels, are oligarchic organizations where the leaders prioritize political survival over ideological commitment.6

The idea of parties being hierarchical and driven by tactical motives was also later shared by Kaare Strøm. Strøm described parties as being office-seeking, vote-seeking or policy seeking, depending on organizational structure and institutional conditions.7 Policy seeking parties are according to Strøm characterized by a higher degree of internal democracy, while vote- and office seeking parties tend to be more hierarchical.8 Strøm treats party behavior from a supply and demand point of view, where parties are motivated to pursue different goals depending on the political setting in which they are acting.9

Otto Kircheimer’s idea of the catch-all party also describes how parties participating in electoral systems revise their policies in order to reach a broader set of voters. Kircheimer argues that parties - in particular socialist and Christian democratic parties - in Western democratic systems tend to transform into catch-all mass parties in order to appeal to the population at large rather than a specific group.10 This is done by deemphasizing the

6 Tezcur, p.71, 2010
7 Strøm, p. 565, 1990
8 Ibid, p.593-594
9 Ibid, p. 570
10 Krouwel, p. 24, 2003
ideological history of the party, strengthening the leadership and decreasing the importance of individual members, as well as de-emphasizing confessional inhesion or class allegiance and also securing financial and electoral support from interest groups. The result is a consensus-building party but with looser ties to the civic society, and ideological erosion of the system at large.

Sánchez-Cuenza brings another dimension to the equation of party behavior: ideological rigidity of party leaders. According to Sanchez-Cuenza, moderation is a tradeoff between political gains and ideological principles. It is most likely when the ideological rigidity of the party is low, ideological distance between parties is large, and the ideological distance between the party in question and the median voter is small. Parties can derive utility from other things than policy and electoral success, such as maintaining of ideological principles, either because they expect to gain voters’ preference in the long run, or because they value the defending of these principles for their own sake. Power alone is not the only driving force behind party behavior, although ideological rigidity can also be the outcome of tactical reasons.

Overall, this paradigm treats parties as hierarchical, power-seeking and strategic organizations, and moderation as a result of tactical motives. Sánchez-Cuenza brings in another dimension – ideology – in party behavior, as well. This is an aspect which has been given much thought in the paradigm of Islamist party Moderation.

**Inclusion and moderation of Islamist parties**

As Tezcur points out, a common thread in this theoretical field is the idea of inclusion of parties into the political system resulting in their moderating. Although focus has also been on other factors, such as different kinds of economic liberalization which promote moderation of anti-system parties, the inclusion-moderation hypothesis is still given much attention in the literature. The consensus, however, reaches only as far as stating that inclusion in competing political systems can cause radical parties to revise their policies to be more pluralistic and democratic. Ideas of the causal mechanism behind these transformations are more numerous. The inclusion-moderation hypothesis has in later years come been used to

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11 Ibid, p.27
12 Ibid, p.24
13 Sanchez-Cuenza, p.326, 2004
14 Ibid, p.325
15 Ibid, p.330
16 Tezcur, p.72, 2010
17 Wilson Sokhey, Kadir Yildirim, 2012
explain Islamist party moderation, which has intensified the discussion on which mechanisms are behind it. It also created a debate on whether Islamist groups really can commit to more democratic and pluralistic values, or whether that moderation would only be a means in order to implement their Islamist goals, a debate which in turn has led to much focus on the distinction between tactical and ideological moderation in literature treating Islamist moderation. According to Tezcur, who studied reformist Islamist movements in Iran and Turkey (2010), ideological moderation of radicals must be seen as a process which is separate from the tactical moderation coming from institutional inclusion. The ideological aspect is one which can favor tactical moderation of a party, or hinder it. Moreover, Tezcur argues that the domestication of tactically moderated actors may impede and undermine democratic struggles.

Bassam Tibi takes a radical stand in the question of Islamist moderation. He argues that it is important to separate Islamism and Islam in this debate, since Islamism is not compatible with democracy, but Islam is. Even in the case of peaceful Islamists integrated in the political system, who accept parts of democracy such as electoral competition, they still share the same goal all Islamists work for: an Islamic order. Thus, participating and working for political power is still a means to reach this goal, which is in itself not compatible with democratic pluralism. Because of this, there is no such thing as ideological moderation in the case of Islamism, should there be a change in a party’s ideology resulting in an honest embracement of democratic values, that party would by definition cease to be Islamist, according to Tibi.

He also argues that parties that get rid of their Islamist label – such as the AKP in Turkey and now Ennahda in Tunisia – do so in order to conceal their agenda rather than to abandon it. The conclusion that Islamist moderation is mostly a result of pragmatism and leads to very shallow democratic commitment is also supported by other studies of Islamists, for example in Turkey.

Jillian Schwedler, however, stated in her book “Faith in moderation”, that political openings in combination with horizontal intraparty structures promotes “normative moderation” of Islamist parties in opposition, by creating cooperation opportunities in a pluralistic setting.

18 Gurbuz, p.238, 2010
19 Ibid,p.239
20 Tibi, p.44 , 2008
21 Ibid, p.47
22 Ibid, p.45
23 Gurses, p.646
24 Chase, p.1223, 2007
This view is shared by Wickham, who examined the Egyptian moderate Islamist Wasat Party whose founders participated in formal representative institutions prior to the party’s founding. Her study shows that also limited institutional openings can promote moderation of Islamist parties. Parties can have incentives to moderate under political constraint in order to evade increased constraints, or to seize opportunities and increase the likelihood of being included in case of future political openings. Wickham also argues that in the case of the Wasat party, moderation was not always the more strategic move, which indicates that the party’s participation in representative institutions also created opportunities for political learning, resulting in changes in party leaders’ values. As described in Schwedler’s and Wickham’s works, moderation can have tactical and ideological motives, where striving for political goals is the mechanism behind tactical moderation and political learning from cooperation is behind the ideological. In an article on inclusion and moderation of Islamist parties, Schwedler also argues that it is not necessarily hard to distinguish between the two, as parties’ internal debates and documents can show whether ideological discussions have been held prior to moderation of policies.

Kasper Ly Netterstrøm offers a conciliatory and more nuanced view of the ideological versus tactical motives to moderation. He questions the distinction between the two, arguing that ideological moderation can come as a result of tactical compromises made by party elites, and that moderation for tactical reasons does not have to be temporary or shallow. The internal dialogue that, according to Schwedler, characterizes ideological revision of a party need not come before the compromises and concessions – but can be a result of it, as in the case of Ennahda Party in Tunisia where party leaders toured the country in order to reconcile rank and file members with the party’s renewed policies. This shows that hierarchical organizations can produce ideological moderation as well, and also, as Netterstrøm points out, that political power is not only a means for Islamists to implement their agenda, but can also be a goal in itself. In order to get a complete picture of Islamists behavior, diversity of motives and in particular personal trajectories shaping Islamists’ actions must be considered.

In the case of Ennahda, experiences from living under dictatorship and in exile helped shape their behavior, and factors such as fear of the old regime and secular opposition combined

26 Ibid, p.224, 2007
27 Schwedler, p. 60, 2007
28 Ibid, p.119
29 Netterstrøm, p.129, 2015
30 Ibid, p.121
with confidence in their own chances of success in democratic elections played part in motivating their efforts to complete the constitution. Netterstrøm concludes that the result of Ennahda’s participation in the constitutional process resulted in them being a force of secularization, as their islamist ideology has been adapted to modern democracy, and their recognition of the constitution has ended any strive for a political model based on an Islamic order.

Netterstrøm’s article is interesting because it questions the way the field tends to treat Islamist parties as being purely ideological or purely tactical, showing that sometimes moderating ideological positions and committing to democratic principles is also what makes sense in order to secure political survival and pursue political gains. This brings new light on the discussion on ideological and tactical moderation, showing that the distinction sometimes made between ideological and tactical moderation and the circumstances which bring them about have been overstated. Netterstrøm’s work is also interesting because he offers hypotheses regarding the future path of the Ennahda Party in Tunisia. He states that the party’s embracement of the new constitution might be Ennahda’s first step in a transformation from an Islamist movement into a more conventional conservative party. The fact that the party announced its official breaking with political Islam about a year after Netterstrøm wrote this, makes it relevant to also look at his other predictions for the future of the Ennahda:

The pressure to abandon Shari‘a and accept freedom of conscience will persist. If Ennahda wants to compete in future elections, it will need to appeal to centrist voters.

Such a drift from classic Islamism toward a more generic conservatism will still give Islam a prominent place in Ennahda’s rhetoric and concerns, but it will likely be expressed in terms of an “identity politics” not so different from the appeals of the Christian right in the United States.

This study will build on the conclusions made by Netterstrøm, and aims to test the hypotheses presented, in order to confirm or discard them and thus bring more insight into the puzzle of

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31 Ibid, p.118
32 Netterstrøm, p.122, 2015
33 Ibid, p.123.
34 Ibid.
motives behind Islamist moderation. But it also aims to elaborate one of the contextual factors which can affect decisions to move away from Islamist ideologies and rhetoric.

Netterstrøm rightly emphasizes contextual factors and personal trajectories as shaping Islamist motives. He mentions fear of the old regime and secular opposition in the case of Tunisia. This idea also corresponds with Strøm’s supply and demand point of view, that parties are motivated to pursue different goals depending on the political setting in which they act. However, something which the field of Islamist moderation in general rarely pays attention to is the actors in the other end of the Secular-Islamist scale. As more and less radical interpretations of Islam compete for power and truth in the Muslim world, radical Islam and the threat it poses to democracy in the region is something parties of this kind must take into consideration when making strategic decisions. This study also aims to examine what role the presence of radical Islamist groups can play in shaping Islamist parties’ objectives to move away from radical positions.

Case selection

This section presents the case selected for this study. It provides a short background, and motivates why the case of Tunisia and the Ennahda Party is a suitable case in relation to the theoretical framework.

Tunisia

Tunisia, as a deviant case and hopeful exception to the failed uprisings in the Arab region 2011, has been of great interests to scholars of democratic transition and Social Sciences at large. Ever since the ousting of the authoritarian regime and former dictator Ben Ali, the country has walked a winding path towards democracy. The country shares many problems characteristic for the region with its less successful neighboring countries, and is often seen as a test case for democracy in the Middle East. A recurring theme during Tunisia’s democratic transitions has been tension and disunion between secularists and Islamists, but also compromises and concessions on the part of the latter, making it an interesting case for students of moderation theory. The country has had problems with radical Salafist groups

35 Ibid, p. 570
36 Arief, humud, p.497, 2014
37 Ibid, p.498
38 Ibid, p.497
39 Netterstrøm, p.110, 2015
trying to influence the political field ever since the revolution, has been exposed to several terrorist attacks and is the biggest exporter of foreign jihadist fighters to ISIS in Syria.\textsuperscript{40} This also makes Tunisia an interesting case for examining the role of these groups on Islamist party moderation.

**The Ennahda Party**

In the end of 2011 an election to the National Constituent Assembly – the electoral body whose mission would be to produce a constitution – was held. The Islamic party Ennahda won a majority of the seats. Ennahda had a history of cooperating with other oppositional parties in the period of authoritarian rule,\textsuperscript{41} but the party entered the constitutional process with a clearly Islamist political agenda, and the ambition to get a reference to shari‘a in the constitution.\textsuperscript{42} Reaching a consensus between secularists and Islamists, consequently, proved a troublesome task. After several crises, many concessions made by Ennahda, and two years of completing the constitution, it was the liberal and secular ideas that won in spite of the Islamists being in majority. The Ennahda Party backed the new constitution, showing all signs of having revised their Islamist agenda to be more in line with liberal democracy.\textsuperscript{43} Netterstrøms study of the party’s moderation showed that the leaders made concessions out of political calculation in order to pursue political power, and later developed the party’s ideological logic to fit its new position, by meeting with rank and file members in order to reconcile them with it.\textsuperscript{44} Already in the first years following the revolution, The Ennahda Party showed a confirming case of the inclusion moderation theory, and also of how influential leaders’ political calculations can cause ideological reformation of Islamist parties. This study however, will focus on a less studied and more recent phase of the Party’s evolution – its breaking with political Islam in 2016.

In May 2016, prior to the Party’s tenth national conference, Ennahda’s founder and President Rachid El Ghannouchi stated in an interview with Le Monde that there is no longer any need for political Islam in Tunisia.\textsuperscript{45} The context of the tenth National Conference, as presented on

\textsuperscript{41}Netterstrøm, p.115, 2015
\textsuperscript{42}Ibid, p.116
\textsuperscript{43}Ibid, p. 110
\textsuperscript{44}Ibid, p.120
its official website, was one “of evolution for [the] Ennahda Party”. The decision to separate the religious movement from the political party, leaving a “National democratic party” based on Muslim values, were accompanied during the conference and afterwards, by statements on the importance of national unity and democratic stability. In light of Moderation theory, the natural question is, how much of this rhetoric is concealment of another, more calculating agenda, and how much is actual commitment to secular values and the nation’s democratic development? Either way, it is the next step on the Ennahda Party’s path of moderation; the decision is a clear change of policies, a move away from excluding and radical positions, and a move towards secularization. In breaking with its Ideological roots, the party stands out in its region, making the party an even more confirming case in the theoretical paradigm of Islamist parties. This allows a closer study of the motives behind this transformation, and which contextual and organizational factors mattered.

By looking at how the party frames its decision to separate religion and politics to its members and society in whole, this thesis will outline what motives were behind this reformation.

Methods

In the following section the Methodology used in this study is presented, followed by a discussion on the benefits and disadvantages of using this methodology.

Qualitative content analysis

The method for this analysis will be based on qualitative content analysis, which is a method that allows for examining of important elements and messages in the material used, and also the context in which these elements and messages are found. Although content analysis is primarily a constructivist method, it will be used for positivist purposes in this paper – as the goal is to test and verify or discard hypotheses. One of the strengths of qualitative research in general and content analysis in particular is its ability to look closer at causal mechanisms and the behavior of actors, which is precisely the purpose of this study, making qualitative methodology a natural choice. Admittedly, a more desirable method could have been in-depth

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47 Ennahdha International Page (Official), ‘Transcript of #Ennahda president @r_ghannouchi’s speech at the opening ceremony of the tenth party conference’, Facebook, 21 May 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/Nahdha.International>
48 Esaason et al., p.210, 2012
49 Esaason et al, p.49, 2012
interviews for example, but with the time and material available content analysis was deemed the most fruitful way of accessing the party’s motives.

Analytical categories
The formulation of analytical categories will be done in an inductive fashion, in the sense that they are not defined beforehand but based on what is found in the empirical study of the material. This allows for finding common themes, topics and arguments in the material, and makes it possible to find themes not expected beforehand. What might be a challenge for the validity of this study is the fact that motivations are not necessarily the same thing as motives, but through the use of carefully constructed categories and by clear argumentation and motivation for the interpretations made, this problem can be minimized. Regarding reliability, interpretation can be a challenge to the reliability of a study, since every observer may interpret the material differently. Also, using inductively constructed categories may increase this problem, as it may result in different analytical categories should someone wish to repeat the study. However, carefully made interpretations, and clearly constructed and defined categories can help minimize or make up for this problem, as well.

Material
In this section, the material that has been used in the analysis is presented and discussed. The selection is motivated for, and lastly the weaknesses and strengths of the material are discussed.

Sources
The material used for the content analysis of Ennahdas transformation consists of primary sources from the party itself. Content from the party’s official international Facebook page as well as Twitter page will be used, and also the content from some Ennahda officials’ Twitter accounts. Mostly English sources have been used, as this was deemed most efficient. A possible problem here is that the party could present different information to international followers than to Tunisians, although I have made the assessment that important information such as statements by party leaders and official party statements have been posted in both English and Arabic or French. What is more, content from both the international and Tunisian official Facebook and Twitter pages have been intermingled on respective pages, indicating that information in English, French and Arabic goes out to a both international and Tunisian audience.
Some documents and statements from the official website for the party’s Tenth National Party Conference will be used. Other material used are interviews, speeches made by party officials at conferences, and articles and posts written by party President Rachid El Ghannouchi and International spokesperson Sayida Ounissi. Ghannouchi and Ounissi are two prominent actors in representing the party, and have made several appearances commenting the party’s new course and identity, which is why much focus will be placed on them in the analysis.

The amount of data is based on the principle of data saturation – when the material no longer offers any new relevant data – in this case when new material does not present any new themes or topics raised – the amount has been judged as sufficient. In using sources from different media channels, different actors within the party and from different situations and contexts, as well as comparing English, French and some Arabic sources, the ambition have been to create an overview of how the party motivates and presents its changing identity, while considering the principle of data triangulation.

**Weaknesses and strengths of the material**

The main weakness of the material used is the fact that it contains only public statements. The ideal set of material would contain internal documents and protocols of meetings, in order to really access the party’s reasoning behind their transformation. However, as long as the party’s framing and motivation of the issue is put in relation to the context in which it is presented, public material can also provide an understanding of the party’s motives. What is more, using material that reaches an audience both within and outside of Ennahda, while considering data triangulation and saturation, can give insight in what message the party wishes to send to the constituency, allowing examination of underlying tactical motives.

**Analysis**

In the following part the empirical analysis of the Ennahda Party will be presented. The main motives discernible in the party’s framing of their transformation will be presented in separate categories and subcategories.

**Becoming the necessary voice of moderate and democratic Islam**

In his first commentary about the Ennahda Party’s rebranding, President Rachid El Ghannouchi stated that political Islam is no longer relevant in the Tunisian context,⁵⁰ and

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that this reformation consolidates the difference between Muslim Democrats and Radical Islamists.\textsuperscript{51} What is more, international spokesperson Sayida Ounissi stated in an article a few months earlier, that it makes no sense to keep associating themselves with radical groups representing extreme interpretations of Islam. It is misleading, but also time consuming and unnecessary, constantly having to make clear the difference between themselves – as democrats – and radical groups.\textsuperscript{52} In fact, the need to consolidate Islam’s compatibility with democracy in general, and more specifically conciliating the party’s Muslim identity with its democratic commitment is one of the clearest discernible motives for the party’s recent reformation. Ghannouchi, for example, states that:

\begin{quote}
Ennahda’s evolution should serve as evidence that Islam is indeed compatible with democracy and that Islamic movements can play a vital, constructive role in fostering successful democratic transitions.\textsuperscript{53}
\end{quote}

It has been a question of consolidating these ideas not only to Ennahda opponents, but also to its own followers. This is apparent when looking at how the party leaders frame the issue, and whom they address in different contexts. The party aims to become a leading – and indispensable – voice of moderate and democratic Islam, by stressing two elements: firstly, the positive relationship between Islam and democracy within the movement, and secondly their leading role in combating extremism, setting an example and being a democratic alternative.

\textit{The Muslim democrats}

One of the topics put up for discussion at Ennahda’s Tenth National Conference was “the need to define itself as a democratic political party with an Islamic reference”.\textsuperscript{54} This need, as well as the need to stress the party’s historical commitment to democracy, is mirrored in the rhetoric of party elites. In his commentaries about the party’s new brand as Muslim democrats, President Ghannouchi compares the party’s position to that of Christian democrats in Europe. Such parties, he argues, have since long proved that

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{51} Ennahdha International Page (Official), ‘Transcript of #Ennahdha president @r_ghannouchi’s speech at the opening ceremony of the tenth party conference’, Facebook, 21 May 2016,
\item \textsuperscript{53} Ennahdha International Page (Official), ‘Article (Eng transl) by @R_Ghannouchi President of the governing #Tunisia.n #Ennahdha Party @ZeitOnline’, Facebook, 4 Jan. 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/Nahdha.International>
\item \textsuperscript{54} Ennahdha International Page (Official), ‘After the executive & financial reports, #Ennahdha delegates began discussion of motions. Here’s an overview of the motions to be voted on:’, Facebook, 21 may 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/Nahdha.International>
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
religious values can influence politics without dominating a party’s political agenda. This is also what Ennahda has always been aiming to do, he continues, to combine democracy and Islam in such a way. This view is also shared by Sayida Ounissi, who stated that “Muslim-democrat” is “in a nutshell” describing the party’s aim from the beginning – reconciling Islam and democracy in the Arab world.

Although stressing the fact that the party has always been committed to democracy and even that the religious and political always have been distinct in practice, the party also confirmed at the Tenth National Conference that they have, in fact moved away ideologically from what is called Islamism. Ghannouchi has, in his speech at the conference as well as in public statements afterwards, framed the party’s Islamist history as a matter of being a protest movement against dictatorship, which is no longer necessary in the post-despotic Tunisia. He also announced that those confused by the separation of politics and religion should consider this move in the light of the party’s evolution since the 1970s. In creating this cohesive picture of the Ennahda’s history in relation to its recent evolution, party leaders entrench its Muslim and democratic identity to both its members and the rest of society.

Post-Despotism in the Arab context, however, not only means post-Islamism to Ghannouchi, it also means post-Secularism. Islam is far from irrelevant in the Tunisian context, according to Ennahda. The Islamic reference, to them, is a natural consequence of Islam being the religion of most Tunisians, which is also stated in the constitution. The
constitution also supports openness, which the party identifies as one of the core values of Islam. By conciliating Islamic values and democracy, Ennahda aims to be an open party specialized in politics, while at the same time preserving Tunisia’s cultural roots. All in all, the circumstances and timing is right, and the context of political reform is seen as fertile ground for the emergence of democratic Islam.

Worth noting is the way Ghannouchi talks about the term “Democratic Islam”. He refers to it as something of his own invention. Ghannouchi is an important actor in formulating the party’s new position and identity because of the religious and political authority he possesses. He has written many influential works on Islam and Islamism, and Ennahda members especially tend to give great importance to his words. This authority, along with a high level of intra party discipline and tradition to follow the leaders’ decisions was useful when the party elite needed to make sense of its new course to rank and file members during and after the constitutional process. The dialogue that was initiated then seems to have led up to the discourse influencing the party’s new direction presented at the Tenth National Party Conference. The party announced in a statement before the Conference that the issues addressed there had been subject of intense dialogue for the past two years, and in reports on local conferences it was also stated that Ghannouchi had attended several of them, talking about the importance of holding the Conference in the context of the country’s continued democratization, among other issues addressed.

This indicates that the Party leaders’ continue to use dialogue with the party’s grassroots as a means of formulating the party’s new identity.

In his public statements on Ennahda’s new course, Ghannouchi presents the Islamic values influencing the party as not only compatible with democracy, but as catalysts for

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64 Ibid.
68 Ibid.
69 Ibid, p.
tolerance, pluralism and other democratic values.\textsuperscript{72} This idea is uttered in the concluding statement of the Conference, and has been emphasized by the party President both when addressing the party and in other contexts.\textsuperscript{73} In other words, the party emphasizes the positive relationship between Islamic values and democratic politics to both to its members and non-members. The Conference’s concluding statement, which was posted on an official website as well as on the party’s website, very clearly addressed Ennahda members in a reformist spirit. Islamic references were referred to as a source of inspiration for the values on which free societies are built. Stating firmly that the mentioned Islamic influence would not be just an empty slogan, it also offered a reminder that “reformist substance” can be added to Islamic values such as tolerance, freedom and justice.\textsuperscript{74}

In conclusion, the party is both internally and outwards creating a new and more clearly formulated identity as Muslim Democrats, needed in the society in which they act, and whose Islamic reference is not only compatible with, but a source for democratic values. This is done in its public statements, by using party elites’ influence, and by internal dialogue.

\textit{Combating extremism}

In consolidating their distance from radical, antidemocratic movements, Ennahda also want to set an example, and be a part of the solution in combating terrorism. The overview of motions presented at the Tenth National Conference (which was also posted on Ennahdas’ Facebook page) stated that:

\begin{quote}
The questions to be debated in this historic party conference have implications for the future of Muslim democracy, which go beyond Tunisia and affect the region and the world as a whole.\textsuperscript{75}
\end{quote}

When concluding the same conference, the party confirmed its hope to form a broad trend of Muslim democrats in the region, denying any contradiction between modernity and Islam.\textsuperscript{76}

\textsuperscript{73} Ennahdha International Page (Official), ‘Transcript of #Ennahda president @r_ghannouchi's speech at the opening ceremony of the tenth party conference’, Facebook, 21 May 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/Nahdha.International>
\textsuperscript{75} Ennahdha International Page (Official), ‘After the executive & financial reports, #Ennahdha delegates began discussion of motions. Here's an overview of the motions to be voted on:’, Facebook, 21 may 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/Nahdha.International>
successful alternative which respects Arab-Muslim identity but also offers social and economical development can help contributing to combating extremism in the region. Ennahda's recent shift is such a successful alternative, Ghannouchi states in an article. The Arab world is in need of a Muslim party with clear distinctions between politics and religion, in order to present a faith-based political alternative to young people, sending the message that Islam is a force of democratization and not conflict. In the light of Islam being used in the name of barbarism, Ennahda leaders see the party as playing an important role as a counter-example. This is evident especially in public statements made by party President Ghannouchi in interviews, articles, and other contexts. At the Mediterranean Dialogues Conference in Rome 2016, he stated that destructive, illiberal interpretations of Islam can only be defeated by democratic interpretations of it, and that terrorism can be defeated by freedom.

Sayida Ounissi stated in an interview that Ennahda wants to depoliticize Islam, rather than deemphasize the party’s Islamic roots. The separation of state and mosque is indeed a recurring objective in the party’s framing of their transformation. The Ennahda wants the religious sphere to be exercised by rightly trained imams, and politics to be conducted by politicians. This is in order to prevent the exploitation of any of the fields - stop officials to use religious rhetoric for political purposes and prevent religion from being hostage to politics. “The mosque should be a place for unity” as expressed by Ghannouchi in a CNN interview. This separation, and the improvement of religious governance, is presented as better preparing Tunisia to fight extremism, as it brings back moderate Islamic thinking into

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77 Ghannouchi, p.63,2016
78 Ennahda International Page (Official), ‘Article (Eng transl) by @R_Ghannouchi President of the governing #Tunisia.n #Ennahda Party @ZeitOnline’, Facebook, 4 Jan. 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/Nahdha.International>
79 Ibid
81 Ibid.
83 Ghannouchi, p.64,2016
the country, and leads to better religious education.\textsuperscript{85} Further, the party is aiming to get rid of the existing connection in Tunisians’ minds between Ennahda and religiousness.\textsuperscript{86}

By showing a will to take a leading role in fighting extremism, and at the same time separating the links between its party and the mosque, Ennahda further emphasizes the important role it plays as a Muslim democratic party while also protecting itself from being associated with these groups. Instead of being perceived as a part of the problem, they present themselves as being part of the solution.

**Becoming an open national party for all Tunisians**

“Together for Tunisia’s renaissance” was the message of a post on Ennahda’s twitter two days before the Tenth National Conference.\textsuperscript{87} Another statement, on the Conference website, announced that the Ennahda now wants to improve its performance as an important Tunisian party, striving to avoid past mistakes.\textsuperscript{88} It is a message which is frequently present in the party’s motivation for its recent development – The Ennahda is for everyone, and wants to be an important, unifying force in Tunisia’s renaissance in the aftermath of the revolution (Harakat en-nahda, the party’s full name in Arabic, means The Renaissance Movement).

According to Ennahda, the old ideological debate about Islamization versus secularization was settled during the constitutional process – one of the reasons why political Islam is no longer relevant in the Tunisian context.\textsuperscript{89} What is relevant, however, is focusing on solving issues important to all Tunisians – and this is what Ennahda very clearly expresses as its ambition to do from now on. The party no longer wants to be something in between a political party and a movement\textsuperscript{90} - and they realize that this requires a change in the perception of the

\textsuperscript{85} Ghannouchi, p.61 ,2016
\textsuperscript{87} @EnnahdhaParty, ‘#Ennahda Tenth National Party Conference, 20-22 May 2016: "Together for #Tunisia’s Renaissance”http://fb.me/C1NxH7Zh’, Twitter, May 18 2016, 02:07 am. <https://twitter.com/EnnahdhaParty/status/732860143390466048>
party, towards a centrist national party. The concluding statement on the Tenth National Conference announced that:

The Conference chose the new identity of Ennahdha to be a national party that focuses on what unites, whose organizational structure accommodates pluralism and diversity, and that rejects exclusion, division of society, or disunity in relation to major national interests.

This goal is apparent in both their rhetoric and actions - emphasizing the party’s history of political learning which has brought them to this point, stressing their commitment to Tunisia and the Tunisian development, and lastly, opening up to and addressing all Tunisians.

**A movement of evolvement and learning**

The Ennahda Party is often keen to mention its tradition of cooperation and evolution. The Conference was beforehand referred to as “an attempt to build a bridge from history to a better future”, in order to learn from past mistakes and focus on current challenges. At the opening ceremony, this was also apparent when Ennahda leaders addressed the party. “You see before you an authentic Tunisian Ennahda who is not afraid of evolution, reform or progress”, co-founder Abdelfattah Mourou announced. Likewise, President Ghannouchi stated that the party never stopped evolving, and that Ennahda members have gone through hardships and trials which have taught them self-evaluation and to act selflessly. 35 years of self-evaluation has according to Ghannouchi led the party to where it is today, and the party will continue to practice self-criticism in order to go forward. He describes the party as having gone from an ideological movement focusing on identity politics to a protest movement and now to a national Democratic Party committed to the constitution. This
rhetoric is also found in the overview of motions for the Conference, which stated that Ennahda must be true to its spirit of renewal and evolution, as the party of “Renaissance”.99

In a similar way to how they framed its Muslim and democratic history in order to promote a certain image to members and non-members, the leaders seem to use its history to present itself as a flexible party committed to learn, who is now ready to serve all Tunisians. When stating that the issues important for all of Tunisia would be discussed at the Conference, the party also underlined that they have had time to contemplate these issues away from power in the past years.100 The party faced a lot of criticism during their time in power 2011 to 2013, and now wants to emphasize what they learnt from their experience in power, but also from their experience afterwards. They are also careful to present this renewal as a conscious decision, and the results of internal dialogue.101

In the concluding statement of the Conference, it was stated that it was a chance for the party to renew itself in order to better serve Tunisia, and established that the reformist path had led Ennahda to becoming a national party seeking a fair society and a dignified life for all Tunisians.102 This concludes well the message that the party wants to send to its members and non-members alike, in order to make sense of their new course.

Committed to Tunisia

In his introductory speech at the Conference, Ghannouchi praised the Ennahda members who participated in the National Constituent Assembly for their wise decision-making which contributed to facilitating Tunisia’s path towards consensus and social stability.103 This commentary is an example of something else the party frequently stresses - their contribution and commitment to the Tunisian constitutional process. During the process which lasted late 2011 to 2014, there were many obstacles and in particular disagreements between secularist opposition and Islamist Ennahda,104 and also political turbulence resulting in political

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100 Ibid.


103 Ennahdha International Page (Official), ‘Transcript of #Ennahdha president @r_ghannouchi's speech at the opening ceremony of the tenth party conference’, Facebook, 21 May 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/Nahdha.International>

104 Gramel, p.392, 2014
assassinations.\textsuperscript{105} In the end Ennahda had to step down from power in mid 2013.\textsuperscript{106} This is something which the party repeatedly refers to in order to emphasize their commitment to Tunisia and its progress:

And when we were discussing stepping down from legitimately elected government, we repeatedly said: We may lose power, but Tunisia will win.\textsuperscript{107} It is with pride that the party leaders refer to the party’s contributions during the initial transitional period and its “historical” decision to leave legitimately elected office,\textsuperscript{108} announcing that they adapted Tunisia’s interests as a guide to internal and external practices, prioritizing it over partisan rights and interests.\textsuperscript{109} The party also stresses its current commitment to the countries continued democratic development, by stressing the need for cooperation, and putting national interests before partisan objectives.\textsuperscript{110} This was emphasized in the party’s internal dialogue preceding conference as well. During his visits to local conferences, in emphasizing the importance of holding the Tenth National Conference, Ghannouchi urged members to offer further support for the democratic process, reinforcing the principles of cooperation and consensus, economical development and progress.\textsuperscript{111}

Following the Conference, Ennahda sees its new identity as proof of its commitment to consensual democracy, dialogue and negotiation, emphasizing the need for bonds of trust between political actors.\textsuperscript{112} It frames itself as a party who puts Tunisia first. In doing that, however, the party also finds a need to stress its Tunisian belonging. According to International spokesperson Sayida Ounissi, Islamist groups are too often seen as the same transnational actor, placed in the same category. However, these movements must be seen in their own national contexts, she argues.\textsuperscript{113} The party’s links and likeness to the Egyptian

\textsuperscript{105} Ibid, p.400
\textsuperscript{106} Arieff, humud, p.500, 2014
\textsuperscript{107} Ennahdha International Page (Official), ‘Transcript of #Ennahdha president @r_ghannouchi’s speech at the opening ceremony of the tenth party conference’, Facebook, 21 May 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/Nahdha.International>
\textsuperscript{108} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{110} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{112} Ibid.
Muslim Brotherhood is also exaggerated. Ennahda’s history and future is Tunisian, is the message. No one, said Ounissi, thought about calling the Muslim brotherhood to ask for advice during the constitutional process - the party has always sought cooperation with Tunisian actors. This is also how the party sees its future: when confronted with the example of the Turkish AKP and its recent development towards more Islamist policies, Ounissi firmly stated that the Ennahdas future path will not be found in any foreign example, but by looking at the political situation in Tunisia.

**Focusing on all Tunisians**

The Ennahda Party does not wish to be a party that preaches about the hereafter, it wishes to be a party focused on the daily concerns of Tunisians. This was announced by the party President to the French Le Monde when he first commented on the party’s breaking with political Islam. Following its move away from political Islam, the party is eager to express its new focus: What is best for Tunisia, and especially, its people. One of the goals of the Tenth National Conference was to present a renewed Ennahda with national ambitions, a party which can contribute to restore hope to Tunisians, addressing social justice, and rise to its people’s aspirations.

In short, Ennahda sends the message that the party’s current concern is improving life for ordinary Tunisians. In order to do so the party’s political focus will be on the economic transition, moving towards specialization in the political field, and developing programs to improve economic and social welfare. Tunisians are tired of arguing politicians, Ghannouchi stated in his speech. They are concerned with security, the threat from terrorists,

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116 Ibid.
118 Ennahdha International Page (Official), ‘Transcript of #Ennahdha president @r_ghannouchi’s speech at the opening ceremony of the tenth party conference’, Facebook, 21 May 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/Nahdha.International>
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economic development and the rights of exposed groups in the country.\textsuperscript{124} A modern state is not run through slogans, ideological conflicting or backbiting, he continued, urging the party followers not to get involved in these ideological battles.\textsuperscript{125}

The Ennahda sees itself as always having been anti-elitist and wishing to govern for all people. In their recent renewal however, they have identified a need for certain organizational changes.\textsuperscript{126} In an article Ghannouchi claims that they see themselves as a true grassroots-based people’s party, and therefore eases its membership requirement so that Tunisians put off by Ennahdas Ideological background can now approach the party on the basis of their economical or political course.\textsuperscript{127} In addition to eased membership requirements, the party also decided on modernization of certain internal procedures, as well as the decentralization of the party by giving more influence to local branches. This is in order to be able to incorporate a broader sector of Tunisians, as described in the concluding statement of the Conference.\textsuperscript{128}

Formulating its new identity as an open National Democratic Party, the Ennahda appeals to the broader sector of Tunisians by opening up their organization, and focusing on political issues concerning quality of life for ordinary people, and the stability of the country. The Party’s leaders also stress to its members the importance of not being distracted from this path by ideological differences. This new strictly political course is clearly a strategic move, and even identified in a statement preceding the Conference as such, in order to put Ennahda in an effective political and electoral position, which would also help put Tunisia in an important position in the region.\textsuperscript{129}

\textsuperscript{124} Ennahdha International Page (Official), ‘Transcript of #Ennahdha president @r_ghannouchi’s speech at the opening ceremony of the tenth party conference’, Facebook, 21 May 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/Nahdha.International>
\textsuperscript{125} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{127} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{128} Ennahdha International Page (Official), ‘Article (Eng transl) by @R_Ghannouchi President of the governing #Tunisia.n #Ennahdha Party @ZeitOnline’, Facebook, 4 Jan. 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/Nahdha.International>
Concluding discussion

What motivated Ennahda’s breaking with political Islam? The party itself motivates it as being a natural evolvement since they have always been committed to democracy, based on Muslim values. They have also always had a commitment to Tunisia and its revolution, and have always practiced self-evaluation and political learning – making this transformation only natural. They clearly express their goals with their transformation: Becoming a national democratic party reaching out to all Tunisians, with a strengthened political position, and focusing on the country’s continued progress. They also want to set an example showing that Islam and democracy are compatible, protecting the religious and political field alike from exploitation, and counteracting terrorism.

In describing itself as learning and eager to correct past mistakes, the party seems to be addressing those who were not happy with the party’s performance in government 2011 to 2013 when they stepped down from power. One of the reasons behind the mistrust resulting in Ennahda’s stepping down from power in 2013 was suspicions towards its Islamist agenda, and suspicions toward its relations to more radical Salafist groups. In the light of that, deemphasizing its Islamist roots and emphasizing its democratic roots is a tactical move in order to build trust again. At the same time the party keeps its image as an Islamic values-based party, and stresses to its members that this is not just an empty slogan, framing those values as a source for democracy. In doing that, the party balances its distancing from radical Islam with loyalty towards its followers. The concept of democratic Islam gives the Ennahda not only a right to continued inclusion in the political system but also presents them as needed in an Arab, post-despotic society such as Tunisia. This is even more emphasized by taking on responsibility for fighting radical Islamism and terrorism. More than seeing the need of consolidating the difference between themselves and these groups, the party seems to have identified an opportunity to become a hopeful example in the region, and become part of the solution rather than part of the problem. The threat of these radical groups, the influence it has on the concerns of people and their confidence in Ennahda, has clearly put pressure on the party to take a stand. Netterström's hypothesis about the role of Islam in the party’s rhetoric was therefore partly right, as one function of Islam in politics is now to provide values and recognizing Arab-Muslim identities. The party also refers to itself as a Muslim counterpart to Christian democrats, which was also predicted by Netterström. But Islam has a bigger role in

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130 Grami, p.394, 2014
the party’s rhetoric as well, the role of being a source for democratic values and a contributing factor to the success of democracy in Muslim countries.

Building trust and emphasizing their important role in consolidating Islam and democracy in the region are likely strategies in order to reach an electorate broader than the party’s already loyal following, and regaining the trust the enjoyed in the first election 2011. Its goal to become an open National Party for all Tunisians is also a strategy to appeal to a broader set of voters. The aim to incorporate a broader section of the Tunisian society and to attract new followers is quite clearly expressed in the party’s own framing of their new identity. Netterstrøm rightly predicted that the party would appeal to centrist voters, and in fact, the path the Ennahda Party is taking is not unlike what was described by Michels, Strøm and Kircheimer. Downplaying of its ideological luggage and confessional allegiance and appealing to the population at large rather than specific groups are all characteristics of the Catch-all party. The Ennahdas’ decentralizing reorganization however, does not conform to the catch-all party theory, although loosening the regulations for membership could weaken the role of the individual member. However, overall the party’s behavior seems to be in line with the hierarchical and power-seeking organization described by these Scholars.

Concerning ideological versus tactical moderation, the party does have a history of compromise and political learning. However, their compromising and commitment to the constitution was neither as evident nor altruistic as often framed in the party leader’s rhetoric. Rather, it was a result of strategic choices made by party elites, and later framed as natural in order to create a cohesive image of the party— inwards and out. On one hand, the party elite seems to continue on this path, framing their decision to identify as a Muslim democrat and national party as only natural in light of its history, in order to create an image of itself as trustworthy and cohesive. On the other, the strategic choices leading up to this transformation are quite clear. The party continues to use leaders’ – especially Ghannouchi’s - authority in order to influence party members. Exactly how much this was done in the internal dialogue and at local conferences preceding the official decision is hard to outline from this material, but the presence of an internal dialogue shows that the party have identified this as a useful way of moving forward. The fact that Ghannouchi used his authority at local conferences in order to stress the issues later presented at the conference also indicates that although the party and its members evolved ideologically in a non-islamist direction as a result of the

131 Netterstrøm, p.115 , 2015
132 Netterstrøm, p.120 , 2015
constitutional process, the decision to go further on the same path was also one which initially came from above, as a result of party leaders identifying tactical objectives for doing so. However, the internal dialogues, and the fact that the party seems to genuinely consider the pluralistic, democratic system as preferable both for their own and the country’s interests, shows that there has been an element of political learning – even if it comes from above.

In conclusion, there is little in Ennahda’s motives for this change that contradicts their tactical interests. The party’s aim seems to be to become an indispensable actor in Tunisia’s developing democracy. With that said it does not mean that the party is hiding any hidden ideological agenda. As mentioned above there are indicators of the party having moderated their ideological position to align with their new course. The transformation seems to have built on the ideological evolvement the party made during the constitutional process, which facilitated the pursuing of its tactical goals. In that sense, it confirms what Tezcur stated about the ideological aspect being either an obstacle or a facilitator of tactical moderation. However, the pursuing of tactical goals seems to have reinforced the ideological moderation, as it also did during the constitutional process, through authorities’ efforts to ensure that party members are onboard with the new course. This further confirms Netterstrøm's finding that tactical moderation can lead to ideological moderation, and contradicts Tezcur’s idea of tactical and ideological moderation as two different processes.

What is more, even though their rebranding and distancing from radical Islam was driven by tactical motives, it does not mean that the aim of promoting democracy and combating terrorism is insincere. Rather, the party has strong incentives to work against radical Islam because of their risk of being associated with it, and because of the threat it poses to the democratic system in which the party acts.

These conclusions show that also to Islamist parties, moderating ideological positions and committing to democratic principles can be what makes sense in order to secure political survival and pursue political gains. Therefore, ideological and tactical moderation cannot always be seen as two different processes, but rather as mutually reinforcing. It also shows that the threat posed by radical groups can increase the incentive for Islamist parties in democratic political systems to moderate. Both because of the threat these groups poses to Islamist parties’ democratic credibility, but also because of political openings provided by the need for a voice of moderate and democratic Islam in these societies.
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