The Normative Power of Secularism. Tunisian Ennahda's Discourse on Religion, Politics, and the State (2011–2016)

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Abstract: By critically engaging the literature on the inclusion-moderation hypothesis, this paper seeks to show how the normative structure of secularism constitutes, enables, and restricts the discursive space in which Islamists can justify political action. It analyzes changes in Tunisian Ennahda's discourse (2011–2016) as an attempt to navigate between standards of recognition imposed on them by the normative power of secularism on the one hand, and what they can convincingly integrate into their own platform on the other hand.

It has often been assumed that, once they achieve power, Islamists would try to Islamize society through the state by implementing Islamic law and reversing previous societal and political secularization processes (Scott 2014). This prediction is based on several premises: first, it assumes that the captured state had previously been secular. Second, it posits that Islamists pursue the goal of Islamizing the state. Third, it presumes that there is a clear, universal dividing line between the "religious" and the "political" as a secular sphere. Recent scholarship suggests that these assumptions need to be revised. The state, in particular in the Middle East, has never been as secular as a liberal ideal would suggest (Cesari

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2014). Meanwhile, many Islamist actors have distanced themselves from the idea of an Islamic state— they have become post-Islamist (Bayat 2013; Roy 2012).

Despite the increasingly critical academic discourse at a theoretical and empirical level, Islamists are still met with a lot of scepticism. The suspicion that Islamists in power will eventually leave the democratic game and pursue an anti-pluralist program of Islamization has been nurtured by recent developments in Turkey, where the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) has not only made several reforms to re-Islamize society and politics, but increasingly engages in authoritarian practices of rule (Bayulgen, Arbatli, and Canbolat 2018). It is in this context that Tunisian Ennahda re-emerged on the political scene after the ousting of long-time authoritarian ruler Ben Ali in 2011: not only did it gain significant portions of the votes in several elections, it also formed and participated in several government coalitions for the first time since its foundation. During this phase, as many observers have stated, Ennahda made significant concessions to its secular coalition partners and the opposition, and its discourse underwent significant changes, in particular with regard to how it conceptualizes the relationship between religion, politics, and the state.

This paper traces and discusses these discursive changes (2011–2016) in the context of two debates: the inclusion-moderation (IM) paradigm and the politics of secularism. It argues that Ennahda has been exposed to significant pressure that led to these discursive changes. This pressure emerged from what I call the normative power of secularism: secularism has become a standard of recognition of political actors as legitimate, both at a domestic Tunisian and an international level. However, secularism, as it is used here, is not understood as a substantial concept. While there are versions of political secularism in western political thought that name more or less precise standards for how to separate the political and the religious (Rawls 1993; Habermas 2009), I follow those authors who have put forward the notion of the *politics of secularism*. They hold that secularism is not a universal, abstract, neutral, let alone natural principle according to which religion and politics, or religion and the state, *are* and *need* to be separated. Rather, they understand secularism as a form of (state) power to *politically draw* the line between politics and religion. This power is found in both discursive structures and state practice. I will argue that Ennahda's inclusion into Tunisian political processes exposed it to secularism's normative power to which it reacted, among others, by adapting its discourse on religion, politics, and the state.

The paper proceeds in three steps. In a first step, I will briefly review recent debates about IM hypothesis with regard to Islamist actors. Going back to the paradigmatic claims about IM in Jillian Schwedler's (2006) work, I argue that, while it is not necessarily helpful to think about Islamist politics in terms of "moderation," her arguments may help us focus on the normative structures that constitute, enable, and restrict the discursive space in which Islamists can justify political action. In the second part, I connect this argument to the debate on the politics of secularism. Secularism has become the core normative structure which Islamists have to navigate in once they enter the political scene, and in particular when they are in government responsibility. I will sketch how the politics of secularism was already influential on Ennahda's program before its re-entering of the political scene in 2011, i.e., under the regimes of Bourguiba and Ben Ali. In the third, empirical part of the paper, I will retrace three phases of Ennahda's discourse (2011–2016) after the fall of Ben Ali: (1) the formulation and re-formulation of abstract ideas on religion, politics, and the state; (2) Ennahda's renouncement of an Islamist identity and the recasting of its self-image as a Muslim democratic party; and (3) the discursive creation of a new "Other," the Tunisian Salafists, as a threat. The conclusion discusses these discursive changes with regard to their credibility and potential risks they may entail.

THE ROLE OF NORMATIVE STRUCTURES IN THE INCLUSION-MODERATION DEBATE

Much research has been devoted to the question if and how Islamists can become democratic actors. One important paradigm for answering this question is the so-called inclusion-moderation hypothesis (IMH) (Schwedler 2006). It assumes that Islamist actors who enter pluralist political processes, or even party competition, become more moderate. Since its thorough theoretical development and popularization by Schwedler and others, the IMH has been modified, tested, and criticized by different authors in the field of Middle Eastern Studies, and, importantly, it was used for empirically investigating Islamists' actual political practice (Schwedler 2011). Recent debates on the IMH revolved, among others, around the following issues relevant for this paper.

First, a very basic, yet problematic distinction in the IMH literature is the one between "moderates" and "radicals." In the literature on Islamists and democratization, there are three basic meanings to this distinction. The

first understanding emerged from the literature on democratic transitions. It views "moderates" as those who support and "radicals" as those who oppose democratic reforms *within* the existing authoritarian system (Clark 2006, 541). Somewhat counterintuitively, "radicals" may be more democratic than "moderates" in this interpretation: the latter settle for small reforms, thereby confirming and reproducing authoritarian state power, whereas the former "demand substantive systemic change and strongly oppose the power configurations of the status quo" (Schwedler 2011, 350).

A second understanding opposes those who resort to violence ("radicals") to those who do not ("moderates"). This distinction allows for a separation of militant Islamists from those who participate in elections. However, it does not tell us anything about *why* groups resort to violence. One implication of this is that Salafi jihadist groups, such as al-Qaeda and ISIS, end up in the same category as Islamic resistance movements such as Hezbollah and Hamas, who use violence in the context of occupation. Conversely, groups that do not advocate nor resort to violence in the here and now may still adhere to a revolutionary and maybe highly exclusionary ideology (Schwedler 2011, 350–51). Finally, the distinction makes actors such as Hezbollah appear as hybrids: they *both* participate in elections and are even part of the government, *and* resort to violence (Bokhari and Senzai 2013, 169).

This is why a final distinction refers to a group's ideological stance on the question of participation in a democratic polity. There are those who are (or would be) ready to become part of a democratic system, even though they might not subscribe to a western-style liberal form of democracy, and others who reject the participation in any form of secular politics, be they democratic or authoritarian (Clark 2006, 541). In light of a variety of positions Islamists may embrace with regard to different issues, Schwedler and others have put forward arguments for abandoning "moderate" and "radical" as labels for groups. She suggests using the term of moderation instead, thus focusing on the "*movement* from a relatively closed and rigid worldview to one more open and tolerant of alternative perspectives" (Schwedler 2006, 3, emphasis added).

Emphasizing the process of moderation, rather than the category "moderate," involves a second important distinction: "behavioral" (sometimes also tactical or strategic) versus "ideological" moderation. Behavioral moderation is the most common form of moderation analyzed in the literature on democratic transitions. It assumes a causal relationship between regime-induced liberalization and democratization processes and the moderation of political actors who are subjected to newly emerging

institutional structures of opportunity and constraint. Islamists, then, supposedly become more moderate simply by virtue of the institutional checks and balances set up in a democratizing system. What this perspective cannot assess, however, is the extent to which this behavioral moderation is merely provisional. Schwedler (2006, 18) refers to this problem as the "paradox of democracy": actors may use democratic mechanisms—e.g., elections—to rise to power, only to abolish these very institutions once they can.

Picking up this thesis, authors have argued that Islamist moderation through inclusion may remain purely tactical, i.e., a way to postpone the actual "battle." As Zeyno Baran (2008, 57) has argued with regard to Turkish AKP as early as 2008, its inclusion into the Turkish political system and rise to power may not have made them "Muslim democrats," but rather "patient Islamists" who opt for a slow, bottom-up strategy of re-Islamizing the state. Similarly, Mehmet Gurses observes that "support for democracy seems to be provisional and conditioned by whether Islamists are in power or what issue is at stake" (Gurses 2012, 651). Janine A. Clark (2006, 541) finds that cooperation can lead to moderation, which she defines as "a greater acceptance and understanding of democracy, political liberties, and the rights of women and minorities," but that it may remain limited and selective in that it occurs with regard to procedural rather than substantive issues of democracy. This is why Schwedler holds that, in order to be meaningful, moderation must refer to ideology rather than behavior. Moderation, then, is a "change in ideology from a rigid and closed worldview to one relatively more open and tolerant of alternative perspectives" (Schwedler 2006, 22).

Schwedler herself and others have become increasingly sceptical about the analytical value of the behavioral–ideological for understanding Islamist politics. The core problem is that moderation carries a sometimes explicit, sometimes implicit normative baggage with it (Schwedler 2011, 371, emphasis in original): "(W)e *want* Islamists to become more moderate, and so we prioritize causal arguments about which mechanisms produce (…) moderation." Similarly, Kasper Ly. Netterstrøm (2015) reminds us that "moderate" can only be a relative term, but he rightfully criticizes that this relationality is rarely made explicit. In cases where the normative standard is disclosed, moderation is often used to state that an actor becomes more democratic or more secular, which begs the question what conceptual value "moderation" adds to the debate (Netterstrøm 2015, 114). The assumption that underlies many studies is that Islamist moderation is somehow key to the "global democratic

project" (Schwedler 2011, 372) and the democratization of the Middle East. This leads to a political and academic focus on how to "tame" the Islamists—despite a broad consensus among regional specialists that the core obstacle to democratization is the "maintenance of repressive autocratic regimes," not least through massive western support (Schwedler 2011, 372).

Indeed, while much academic effort goes into researching how democratic, secular, or liberal Islamist platforms are, self-proclaimed secular authoritarian regimes or, as in the Tunisian case, their successor parties are not subjected to the same scrutiny and political scepticism. Overemphasizing the distinction between "ideological" and "behavioral" moderation may thus cover up value judgments about Islamists and a deep mistrust in their ability to become democratic actors. It can also entail misleading, sometimes even contradictory claims. As Schwedler argues, in many accounts Islamists appear as both incurably ideological *and* rational, strategic calculators whose only purpose is to deceive domestic and international audiences about their "true" intentions (Schwedler 2011, 370–372). Emphasizing the tactical nature of moderation is another way of suspecting Islamists to have a hidden agenda behind the façade they present to the public. But if we continue to take Islamists' discursive and programmatic changes or concessions as mere rhetoric, how can we *ever* know if they change, and when should we trust them?

For Netterstrøm, the problem goes even deeper: he rejects the notion of prioritizing ideological moderation in the study of Islamists, as proposed by Schwedler. In her seminal study on *Faith in Moderation*, she argues that a mere focus on changing structural opportunities, e.g., the legalization of party organizations, the institutionalization of regular elections etc., is not enough to explain (variation in) ideological moderation. Rather, scholars interested in ideological moderation should observe internal party deliberations: they are the space where worldviews and, importantly, "the boundaries of what the party can justify on ideological grounds and still recognize as Islamic practices" (Schwedler 2006, 196) are renegotiated. For Netterstrøm, this puts moderation in a somewhat apolitical space: "The Islamists make up their mind in a neutral sphere and *then* make a political move. The ideological evolution happens outside the political realm" (Netterstrøm 2015, 113, emphasis in original).

In this way, he goes on, the IM paradigm overlooks the political nature of Islamists, which they share with any other political actor. Once they are confronted with politics, they will necessarily make concessions, sometimes against their will, and aim at finding compromises for pragmatic

reasons. However, these decisions will also affect their ideology—and this should not simply be interpreted as window-dressing or a merely tactical move: if actors invest in convincing their members and constituencies to embrace significant programmatic changes, then this cannot simply be reversed (Netterstrøm 2015, 120–21). As others, Islamists get entrapped in what may have started out as rhetoric, but soon unleashes normative power (Hamid 2016, 188).[1] Netterstrøm also reminds us that Islamists may be interested in power not because they want to implement a certain ideology, but rather to guarantee their own survival and perseverance in a political system. If this goal makes programmatic reforms necessary, then they may deliberately decide to adapt their views.

Indeed, going back to Schwedler's earlier work, one can find a similar argument in her book, and one would therefore be mistaken to interpret her model of ideological moderation as apolitical, as Netterstrøm (2015, 14) does. For this perspective underestimates the importance Schwedler ascribes to what she calls the cultural dimension of political contestation, i.e., narrative structures in which political actors are entangled. They "structure political actions in ways that are equally *if not more constraining than institutions*, and thus may be critical factors in explaining how inclusion may produce moderation" (Schwedler 2006, 147, emphasis added). Actors with a relatively closed ideology face a dual challenge. On the one hand, they need to legitimize their actions with reference to publicly available and acceptable narratives, which may be both hegemonic narratives produced by those in power (e.g., of national unity) and globally diffused narratives (e.g., of democracy, Schwedler 2006, 117). On the other hand, they must reconcile new practices adopted after an opening of the political space with the worldviews they had previously held (Schwedler 2006, 15–26, 130). Or, as Shadi Hamid (2016, 187) puts it:

> "Islamist movements perpetually find themselves in (a delicate balancing act). These movements must demonstrate 'moderation' to secular elites, international actors, and any number of other sceptics. Their conservative base, on the other hand, wants a dose of identity, ideology, and religion, and if not a dose than at least a nod to the movement's 'essence'."

While it is not necessary to follow Schwedler's notion of ideological moderation, what she draws our attention to are the normative structures that constitute, enable, and restrict the discursive space in which Islamists

can justify political action. In what follows, I will argue that secularism is such a normative structure, and a particularly powerful one.

THE POLITICS OF SECULARISM AND THE TUNISIAN AUTHORITARIAN STATE

Since the 1990s, secularization as a supposedly universal process linked to the modernization of societies has been discussed increasingly critically in several disciplines (Casanova 2006). Besides doubts about the empirical validity of the secularization thesis, authors have addressed the ontological and epistemological foundations of the secularization paradigm, as well as the normative claims derived from it. Charles Taylor (2011, 49), for instance, criticizes the "epistemic break between secular reason and religious thought" that underlies both liberal and post-secular normative theories of secularism. Religious arguments are considered as somewhat less rational than secular reasons, which makes religion appear not only as a "faulty mode of reason" (Taylor 2011, 51), but also as a political threat. Rather than formulating abstract principles about the separation of politics and religion, i.e., models of *political secularism*, authors have increasingly been interested in analyzing the *politics of secularism* (Hurd 2008; 2012), i.e., the power practices involved in the political act of drawing the boundaries between religion and an allegedly neutral, secular political space.

Authors such as Talal Asad and Elizabeth Shakman Hurd oppose the view that religion can be defined in a transhistorical and transcultural manner (Asad 1993). Rather, they emphasize the political quality of the very act of defining religion as well as its "'proper place (…)' in a secular society" (Asad 2006, 526). Secularism, then, is a

> "powerful political settlement of the relation between religion and politics
> (…) (or a) practice of state sovereignty that claims to be universal by defin-
> ing the limits of state-centred politics with something called religion on the
> outside" (Hurd 2012, 47).

A state's secular power derives from its ability to define religion and manage it through interventional practices (Mavelli 2012), thus claiming a monopoly on authoritative judgments about legitimate and illegitimate forms of interaction between politics and what is defined as religion.

According to Hurd, even though "secularism" (in the singular) is often presented as a "fixed and final achievement of European-inspired modernity" (Hurd 2012, 36), there are at least two *modi* in which western secular

discourse operates. The first is laicism, a republican ideal that aims at expelling religion from politics and posits a "singular and universal set of relations between sacred and profane dimensions of existence that holds regardless of cultural or historical circumstances" (Hurd 2008, 52). *Laicism* assumes that religion has successfully been banned to the private sphere or disappeared entirely. The second modus, *Judeo-Christian secularism*, claims that "the separation of church and religion is a Western achievement that emerged from adherence to common European religious and cultural traditions" (Hurd 2012, 43). This discourse suggests that secularization is a rational, but particular development reserved for those who have the fitting civilizational predispositions.

Importantly, both discursive formations rely on an image of political Islam as their "Other," even though they construct it in different ways. For laicism, it is "an infringement of irrational forms of religion upon would-be secular public life in Muslim-majority societies" (Hurd 2008, 117; Volpi 2010, 120). In Judeo-Christian secularist discourse, it appears as a civilizational feature of Muslim societies reluctant to modernize and secularize, i.e., separate religion from politics (Volpi 2010, 29–33). As a result of both "Othering" practices, Islamism "has come to represent *the* 'nonsecular' in European and American political thought and practice" (Hurd 2008, 48, emphasis added).

The globalized discursive formation of secularism and political Islam as its greatest threat has become even more powerful since it is connected to the war on terror-narrative (Spencer 2010). Indeed, "terrorism" has become a key frame not only for legitimizing the use of force and extraordinary measures in the west, but also for justifying repression by authoritarian regimes against an Islamist opposition in the Arab world and beyond (Edel and Josua 2018). But even before the emergence of the war on terror-narrative, delegitimizing the opposition on the grounds that they were hostile to secularism was a common practice of the Tunisian authoritarian state—even though it could hardly claim secularism in the form of neutrality for itself. Rather, it created a state version of Islam while simultaneously denouncing the opposition's version of political Islam as an "anti-secular" and dangerous form of blending religion and politics.

As Jocelyne Cesari (2014) has argued, political Islam is usually understood as the politicization and instrumentalization of Islam by Islamist actors who use it as a tool of opposition *against* the self-proclaimed secular state.[2] This dichotomy conceals that the politicization of Islam has *primarily* been driven by the state. The Tunisian regimes under

Bourguiba and Ben Ali, for instance, were marked by the "hegemonic status of Islam": rather than being "neutral" toward religion—as a liberal ideal of political secularism would demand—, religious institutions, leaders, and places were nationalized; a specific version of Islam was taught in public schools; other religions were discriminated in the public sector; and freedoms and rights were partially justified on the basis of religious doctrine (Cesari 2014, 3–18). Interventions by the regime in the religious sphere included, among others, the control of imams in Tunisia's mosques and institutions of religious education, e.g., by opening a state-controlled Faculty of Theology that served Islamic learning rather than leaving this to the prestigious Zaytuna mosque (Cesari 2014, 55; Donker and Netterstrøm 2017).

These measures were part of the regime's project of establishing a form of "State Islam" (Hamdi 1998, 12–6): the regime controlled and regulated the "Islamic" character of Tunisia by promoting a "particular version of Islam suiting its interests (…) (and) advocating a homogenous Muslim identity that contributed to state legitimization" (Cesari 2014, 43). Neither Bourguiba nor Ben Ali pursued an agenda of banning Islam from politics—on the contrary, both concluded "that Islam had to be subordinated to and controlled by state authorities" (Donker and Netterstrøm 2017, 142) in order for their political agendas to work. Thus, while the regime liked portraying itself as secular to the domestic and, importantly, international public, it clearly did not suffice this ideal (Pfeifer 2017b).

Controlling religious institutions and creating an official state Islam was but one pillar of this project. The other side of the coin was the systematic delegitimization and dismantlement of the Tunisian Islamic movement which had emerged in the 1960s and 1970. Under the name of *al-Jamaʿa al-Islamiyya* (the Islamic Group), it initially focused on the level of individual piety and religious life in the private sphere. In its early phase, the movement was ideologically close to the Muslim Brotherhood, advocating the creation of an Islamic State and the principle of *tawhid* and defining its project as decidedly Arab-Islamic rather than Tunisian (Cavatorta and Merone 2013, 860; Kubicek 2015, 288). However, the more the Islamic group got involved in discussions with young people, the more it realized that its categories did not actually match their motivations for mobilizing against the regime. Adopting the name *Mouvement de la Tendance Islamique* (MTI) in 1979, it no longer wanted to limit its activities to the underground but demanded political activism against Bourguiba and pursued a clear politico-economic agenda. In 1981, it even demanded official recognition as a political party (Wolf 2017, 36–51).

The Bourguiba regime reacted to this politicization by arresting hundreds of MTI members. Repression got even harsher when the perpetrators of an attack on tourist sites in 1987 claimed that they were affiliated with the Islamic movement. In this phase, Bourguiba created the narrative of the MTI's connections to an international, fundamentalist conspiracy network that aimed at the destabilization of Tunisia (Hamdi 1998, 41–53). In the same year, Ben Ali took over the regime. It seemed that he would cede the MTI a place in Tunisia's political system.

Under the name of *Harakat an-Nahdhah* (Renaissance Movement, hereafter Ennahda), the Islamic movement managed to gain major shares of the votes in national elections. After this, another massive wave of repression and imprisonment hit Ennahda, and many of the remaining *Nahdawis* went to exile (Wolf 2017, 81). Ben Ali picked up the narrative of his predecessor and portrayed Islamists as an imminent terrorist threat that could only be met by "secular" state power. The success of this strategy was supported by the contemporaneous civil war in neighboring Algeria where the *Front islamique du salut* and other Islamist groups fought against the regime, thus also making the "Islamist threat" appear more real to many Tunisians (Stepan 2012, 100–1). The strategy of creating the "Islamists" as (global) terrorist threat on the one hand, and the regime as a provider of stability as well as a secular form of governance on the other hand, also generated a considerable amount of external support. Ben Ali managed to sell the increasingly autocratic closure of the Tunisian political system as a victory against the "Islamist threat" while at the same time upholding the image of an imminent danger that made western support of the regime inevitable (Jebnoun 2014, 109).

This period had important ramifications for the programmatic turn the movement took. Ghannouchi's writings in prison are said to have shaped Ennahda's position "with respect to public freedoms in the direction of cementing democracy as the only viable political system" (Cavatorta and Merone 2013, 868). As a leading figure, Ghannouchi's pragmatic, non-violent line prevailed in the exile community, and the idea of a violent Islamic revolution was definitely delisted from Ennahda's agenda at the 1995 congress with its decision for unconditional non- violence (Wolf 2017, 94).

As can be seen from this brief historical outline, Ennahda's conception of the relationship between state, society and politics, and religion evolved over time. Its development is in line with the broader observation that Islamism has changed its form of appearance, organization, and program. This is what has been called the post-Islamist turn, which

some have described as a transformation of Islamist into conservative parties (Roy 2012, 9), while others understand it as the project of "fus(ing) religiosity and rights, faith and freedom, Islam and liberty" (Bayat 2013, 8). While still advocating a strong role of religion in the public sphere, post-Islamism recognizes the potential "danger of the idea of the religious state to both religion *and* the state" (Boubekeur and Roy 2012, 5, emphasis added).

Despite these global trends in ideological change among Islamists, however, suspicious attitudes against them still prevail. Among others, they were fuelled by the loss of the AKP as a showcase of Islamists' ability to embrace democratic principles. Moreover, the Egyptian short-lived experiment of Mohammed Mursi's presidency between 2012 and 2013, which ended in his toppling through a military coup, was seen by many as proof of Islamist exclusivist politics. However, it was first and foremost a traumatizing experience for Islamist parties such as Ennahda who saw their worst fears confirmed: they "would never be allowed to govern, no matter how many elections they won" (Hamid 2016, 181). Egyptian president al-Sisi immediately returned to extremely repressive measures against the Muslim Brotherhood, legitimizing his violence against them, including the massacre of Rabaa, by reviving the terrorism narrative (Edel and Josua 2018).

In what follows, I will show how the normative power of secularism led Ennahda to revise its discourse on religion, politics, and their legitimate relationship. The argument is that Ennahda had to counter any impression that it was a fundamentalist or, even worse, a terrorist actor, and that it did so by recasting its own identity as an Islamist movement. The pressure to change emerged from three contexts. First, the fundamentalist label attached to the movement by the Bourguiba and Ben Ali regimes proved to be extremely sticky, both domestically and internationally. This became ever more visible when, second, Ennahda's main adversary, Nidaa Tounes, re-started to engage forcefully in an anti-Islamist discourse, thereby reinforcing the Islamist-secular cleavage in an already deeply divided society (Hamid 2016, 184–8). Ennahda needed to fear that it would face a similar fate as the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. Third, international actors and in particular European states proved to be more than reluctant to cooperate with Ennahda, backing its "secular" counter-parts instead (Kausch 2013). Western scepticism is also mirrored in media reports that Ennahda perceived as representing them in a bad light and tried to fight—discursively and legally—on a regular basis (Pfeifer 2017a).

ENNAHDA'S CHANGING DISCOURSE ON RELIGION–POLITICS RELATIONS

This section traces how Ennahda discursively redrew "the boundaries of justifiable action" (Schwedler 2006, 22) as a result of the normative power of secularism between 2011 and 2016, and how its "leaders *decided to adopt* a new view" (Netterstrøm 2015, 120, emphasis in original) in light of concessions it needed to make in the political process. Ennahda's discourse will be analyzed at three levels: (1) its abstract articulations of, and normative convictions about, the relationship between the state, politics, and religion; (2) its self-construction as a legitimate religio-political actor; and (3) its creation of an "Other" who represents an illegitimate and flawed combination of religion and politics. The following condensed narratives are the result of a discourse analysis of 350 documents (party and election programs; party and press statements; opinion pieces by and interviews with party leaders in Arab and international news outlets; and speeches by party leaders in Tunisia and abroad). While Ennahda publishes statements by diverse actors, it is clear that its president Ghannouchi is a strong leading figure and the face of the party (Netterstrøm 2015), which is why his opinions feature more prominently in the documents.

Abstract Ideas About Religion, Politics, and the State

For understanding how Ennahda thinks about religion and politics, it is important to distinguish two interrelated sets of claims that can be summarized under the labels of *Islamic democracy* and *state neutrality.* The basic argument behind both dimensions is that what democracy looks like ought to be determined by the cultural traits of the society it is built for. Thus, there is no singular, abstract model of democracy that would follow the principle of one size fits all. According to Ennahda, the old regime had deprived Tunisia of its own cultural heritage and Islamic identity, which now needed to be restored to become the basis of its new political system (Ennahda Electoral Programme 2011). Ennahda considers Tunisia's Arab-Muslim identity a non-contentious issue (Ghannouchi 2011c; 2011d; 2012e; Ben Mohamed 2015).[3] For Ennahda, the core question was how to combine it with a democratic model.

Ennahda argues that democracy "reflect(s) the Islamic principles of consultation, justice and accountability" (Ghannouchi 2011f), as well as

the strive for consensus and the rejection of tyranny. Islam and democracy are "intimate and co-existent couples (sic!) and friends" (Ghannouchi 2011a; 2012c). Ennahda emphasizes that religion is a fundamental, moral source of political life and the state. Islam must set the normative framework for the state and politics in the sense that it "provides us with a system of values and principles that would guide our thinking, behaviour, and the regulations of the state to which we aspire" (Ghannouchi 2012a).

However, because there is no single accepted interpretation of Islam, nor a recognized authority or institution which could mitigate between competing teachings (Ghannouchi 2012e), a political mechanism for managing religious pluralism is needed. The task of democracy, then, is to embody the idea of consultation (*shura*) and translate Islam's values into law through public deliberation and parliamentary decisions (Ghannouchi 2012a; 2012e). For this purpose, it is vital for politicians to be educated and familiarized with Islamic values (Ennahda Electoral Programme 2011; Ennahda Statement 2012c; Ennahda Manifesto 2014). In order for "balanced identity" concepts to prevail over "extremism and radicalism" (Ennahda Electoral Programme 2014), institutions such as the Zaytuna mosque and its reformist tradition of thought should be at the center of this educational project (Ennahda Statement 2012c).

Despite this emphasis on Islamic education, Ennahda insists on state neutrality as a complementary concept to Islamic democracy. While in the western tradition, state neutrality is usually associated with its independence from religious institutions (Rawls and Habermas), Ennahda has a more comprehensive notion of state neutrality: it means that the state enforces *neither* one model of religion *nor* a strict secularism. Western societies embraced the idea of secularism in response to a very particular problem-set in European history, which made them look for "ways of liberating the state from religion" (Ghannouchi 2012a). In contrast, Muslim societies faced a different challenge: how to liberate "religion from the state and (prevent the state) from dominating religion" (Ghannouchi 2012a) and thereby allow for multiple interpretations of Islam *and* their societal toleration.

This is why Ennahda does value the "procedural aspect" of secularism, i.e., "the state's neutrality (…) towards religions and its abstention from interfering with people's consciences" (Ghannouchi 2012a). The French model of "comprehensive secularity" (Ghannouchi 2012b), i.e., laicism, with its total exclusion of religion from public life, is considered as a form of state imposition of a secular lifestyle on its people (Ghannouchi

2011b). In order to be democratic, a state must neither pursue this kind of secular extremism, nor side with *one* Islamic school of thought, i.e., adopt a state Islam (Ghannouchi 2011a; 2011d; 2013b). The state must not put restrictions on members of its society in their free practice of religion, as these are "matters of free personal choice" (Ghannouchi 2011f). In theory, the state ought to be neutral toward the religious sphere in the sense that it must not interfere with religious institutions, e.g., by training imams or controlling mosques, nor get involved in negotiating the right interpretation of Islam (Ennahda Statement 2015b).

Ennahda's abstract ideas of an Islamic democracy as formulated in the first years of Tunisia's transition seem rather close to both communitarian (Walzer 1980) and post-secular conceptions of democracy (Habermas 2009). However, they must be seen as a result of complex negotiation within Ennahda, and with other Tunisian parties and parts of society on a number of contentious issues (Netterstrøm 2015). A particularly controversial Ennahda position concerned the right to freedom of expression in the context of "attacks on people's beliefs and sacred symbols" (Ghannouchi 2011e). Ennahda struggled to find an adequate position in these matters. It claimed that it should be in the national interest to protect sacred symbols and advocated the criminalization of their violation "as a violation of the other's freedom" (Ennahda Statement 2012b; 2012c): such "deplorable attacks on faith" should not be justified "under any pretext, such as freedom of expression" (Ennahda Statement 2012d). However, it softened its position in the constitution-making process. The debate ended in a wording of Article 6 that combines the freedom of belief and conscience while also guaranteeing the protection of the sacred by the state. Similarly, the debate on the introduction of *Shari'a* into the constitution was a challenge for Ennahda. While it had officially taken the position not to "instate Shari'a in the new constitution, after the elections, other Ennahda leaders voiced different stances on the issue" (Cesari 2014, 245). Again, Ennahda found a way to argue around these problematic questions, by stating that "Tunisian law is largely based on Sharia. Sharia never left our country— hence it does not need to be 'returned'" (Ghannouchi 2012a). As Netterstrøm (2015, 119–20) puts it, "Shari'a was turned into a matter of values rather than legal norms, thereby justifying the reference to the 'teachings' rather than the 'laws' of Islam in the constitution's preamble."

Creating a New "Self": Ennahda, from Islamic Movement to Muslim Democratic Party

Despite Ennahda's attempts to compromise with other political actors and, at the same time, legitimize its concessions on controversial issues within its programmatic universe, it seemed to perceive a necessity for even more fundamental changes, especially regarding its image as an Islamist actor. This eventually led to a renouncement of its Islamist identity in 2016. Despite the boldness of this move, Ennahda tried to create a narrative that made it appear as a logical consequence of its earlier developments.

Ennahda's story about this identity change is closely related to how it reconstructs Tunisia's history and future trajectory, as well as its own role in these developments. It understands itself as a disciple of the 19th century Tunisian reformist movement who, in the 20th century, stood up against colonial rule (Ghannouchi 2014b). The reformist spirit demands that Ennahda regularly investigate whether its agenda still fits the problems Tunisians are facing. Consequently, the foundation of the MTI is interpreted as motivated by the need to stand up against the secular extremism of the Bourguiba regime (Ennahda Statement 2012a) and to cure the "corrupt society" through a "return to Islam" (Ghannouchi 2013a). Soon, however, it expanded its agenda to include "values of democracy, human rights and civil liberties" (Ennahda Letter 2012). Thus, Ennahda came to play a commendable role in opposing and eventually putting an end to authoritarian rule, despite all the sacrifices related to this, i.e., the imprisonment and exile of many *Nahdawis* (Abdelrahim 2011; Ghannouchi 2011g; Ennahda Statement 2012a; 2012c).

In response to changing demands of Tunisian society, Ennahda evolved from a movement to a party over time. Its commitment to democratic principles "since its founding" (Ennahda Statement 2014) allowed it to become a modern party with "natural vessels for dialogue and consultation" (Ennahda Statement 2012c) in the transition period. Thus, after the revolution, Ennahda was ready to assume responsibility in government *and* integrate all of Tunisia's political strands (Ghannouchi 2014a). It was a key player in concluding the political transition to a democratic system rooted in an Islamic identity (Ghannouchi 2016d).

The achievement of the constitution made a final transformation seem appropriate to Ennahda: the renouncement of its identity as an Islamist party. After its 10th Party Congress in 2016, Ennahda declared: "Il n'y a plus de justification à l'islam politique en Tunisie (…). Nous sommes des musulmans démocrates qui ne se réclament plus de l'islam politique"

(Ghannouchi 2016d). Ennahda now wants to be seen as a democratic party with an Islamic reference (Ennahda Statement 2016a), taking Christian democratic parties in Europe as a role model for their further development and thus potentially becoming a role model for other actors of the region (Ghannouchi 2016c). Ennahda wants to make religion completely independent from politics (Ghannouchi 2016d); it wants to liberate "citizens' capacities in the religious domain (…) from dependence on political changes" (Ennahda Statement 2016b); and it considers the "distinction entre le religieux et le politique (…) une forme de spécialisation qu'impose l'évolution" (Ghannouchi 2016a).

The appearance of Ennahda leaders in several European news outlets as well as the emotional staging of the announcement are indicative of whom this message was sent to: Ennahda wants to rid itself from the Islamist label which has such a bad reputation in the west. Thus, it anticipates western standards of recognition when it presents a new, secularized image of itself to an international audience. At a domestic level, however, this step was ambivalent: Ennahda lost those adherents who were disappointed by the party's ever less Islamic trajectory and oriented themselves toward other options, i.e., Salafist groups.

Creating a New "Other": Salafists, from "Our Children" to Terrorist Threat

Besides its own image campaign, Ennahda also needed to adapt its position *vis-à-vis* the Tunisian Salafist scene. It changed from an almost brotherly attitude to an increasingly sceptical position. Eventually, after several terrorist attacks had occurred, Ennahda framed Salafism in terms of religious extremism and a security problem.

In 2011 and 2012, Ennahda had called upon Tunisians to meet Salafists with a general open-mindedness and with a readiness for dialog rather than demonizing them (Ennahda Statement 2012a). Indeed, Ennahda believed that even the negligible minority of jihadist Salafis (Ghannouchi 2011a; 2011g) could be persuaded to abandon the violent path and to change their convictions (Ghannouchi 2012d). The violence-proneness of some was interpreted as a result of the repressive practices of the old regime (Ghannouchi 2011g). Ghannouchi even expressed his affection toward the Salafists when he declared: "Ce sont nos enfants" (Ghannouchi 2011h).

Ennahda's positive attitude toward the Tunisian Salafist scene got a first crack during the constitution-making process between 2012 and 2014. In

this phase, parts of the Tunisian opposition and civil society, but even some within the Ennahda-led coalition government voiced their concern about its close relationship with the Salafist scene, claiming that Ennahda engaged in a double discourse and basically held the same positions as Salafis (Ghannouchi 2011g; 2012a)—a proposition which Ennahda rejected (Ghannouchi 2012d). Regarding the contentious issue of whether *shari'a* should become a part of the constitution, Ennahda eventually decided to take a different stance than the Salafists who had exerted pressure by demanding a referendum on the matter (Ghannouchi 2012d).

In 2013, an attack on the American embassy and the assassination of two members of the leftist opposition party *Front Populaire* were quickly imputed to the Salafists. Ennahda, still the leading party of the government coalition, warned against premature suspicions and insisted on a fair investigation and legal process for the suspects. It reminded its fellow Tunisians that "Salafists are part of the Tunisian people, enjoying the same rights and bound by the same duties. We defend their right to freely express their views and all their rights" (Ghannouchi 2012c). As a reaction to this, its opponents blamed Ennahda of applying lax security measures and turning a blind eye on violent Salafism.

Even though Ennahda was very cautious not to take a strong stance against Salafism, it claimed in retrospective that it had changed its policy toward the Salafists at that time. "(F)rom this moment on, we realized these people do not accept to work within the boundaries of the law, and that is why we started cracking down on them" (Ghannouchi 2013b). Later in 2013, the Ennahda-led government declared *ansar ash-shari'a*, the most important Salafist party that had decided to join the political system, a terrorist organization (Merone 2017, 81). Ennahda had been reluctant to call the perpetrators of violent attacks "terrorists," but rather referred to them as "jihadi Salafists" (8:30), "groups of delinquents" (Ennahda Statement 2012d), "(violent) extremists" (Jebali 2012), or "conspiring parties" (Ennahda Statement 2013). Now, however, combatting terrorism became a priority, as can be seen in Ennahda's program for the elections in 2014 (Ennahda Electoral Programme 2014). The wave of attacks between 2015 and early 2016 reinforced this even further, and in Ennahda's perception terrorism now constituted the biggest threat to Tunisia and its development.

Moreover, Ennahda tried to portray jihadi Salafism as alien to Tunisian society, stating that "most extremists follow views from the Gulf" (Ghannouchi 2012d). While it had initially stressed the importance of

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the state's neutrality, Ennahda now advocated its intervention: in a situation where "extremists took advantage of the security vacuum (after the revolution) to take over 20 percent of the country's mosques" (Abdessalem 2015), it could no longer reject the control of mosques and imams by the state. Finally, despite the emphasis on the (value of) plurality in Islam's interpretations as formulated in its abstract ideas on religion and politics, Ennahda now frequently claimed that such extremism was the result of a lack of real knowledge about "the true teachings of Islam" (Ghannouchi 2016b; Ennahda Statement 2015a). The "Othering" and eventual securitization of Salafism was the last building block in Ennahda's attempt to appear as an innocent actor in the secular mind.

CONCLUSION

This paper argued that secularism should be viewed as a normative structure which constrains Islamists who enter democratic politics in what they can justify as political action. The analysis of Ennahda's discourse between 2011 and 2016 demonstrated how Islamists have to navigate between standards of recognition imposed on them by the normative power of secularism on the one hand, and what they can convincingly integrate into their own platform, and thus sell to their adherents and electorate, on the other hand. First, Ennahda created an abstract, theoretically more or less convincing narrative about the compatibility between Islam and democracy, which it also used to justify concessions made in the constitution-making process. However, as this did not suffice to disperse allegations of double discourse and a secret leaning toward Salafist positions, Ennahda started an image campaign in order to rid itself from the sticky and stigmatizing label of Islamism. Finally, giving up its original position of dialog and political inclusion, Ennahda also engaged in an increasingly securitizing and delegitimizing discourse against Salafi jihadists, thereby trying to distance itself even further from religious extremism.

The analysis also pointed to several points of tension within the narrative. For instance, Ennahda's ideas about state neutrality were challenged by its own intervention into mosques where they re-installed what they called "moderate imams." Similarly, disqualifying some forms of Salafism as a distortion of Islam's "true message" contradicts the formulated conviction that the state should not prefer one version of Islam over the other. While both moves are understandable in the context of an

increasingly tense Tunisian security situation, in particular in 2015 and 2016, Ennahda risks losing credibility on its programmatic stance. This is particularly true for those somewhat disappointed *Nahdawis* who feel that Ennahda no longer stands for Islamic politics and have turned to Salafism instead (Marks 2017).

The balancing act between meeting standards as set by the politics of secularism and appealing to its electorate and adherents has led to significant changes in Ennahda's discourse. However, it is not clear yet whether these changes will be successful in the sense that Ennahda becomes an actor recognized as a legitimate part of Tunisian politics, whether at a domestic or an international level. The price for the changes made may then be considered as too high by some *Nahdawis*. But even if the changes turned out to be successful and Ennahda became a stable part of Tunisian political life in the years to come, the question remains whether adapting to the normative standards of secularism is the only way for Islamists to enter democratic politics—and what this means for democracy. Or, as Hamid (2016, 198) put it: "If 'democracy' can only succeed, or even come to be, through the marginalization of Islamists or by Islamists themselves conceding their Islamism, then this is a brittle democracy indeed."

NOTES

1. Similar arguments have been made regarding rhetorical entrapment in the context of human (Risse and Sikkink 1999, 27–8).

2. For exceptions e.g., Feuer (2017), Donker and Netterstrøm (2017), and Haseeb (2015).

3. Obviously, this view conceals a variety of alternative views on religion (e.g., agnostic and laicist positions) as well as the existence of religious, ethnic, and sexual minorities (e.g., Jews, Christians, Berbers, but also a growing and increasingly visible LGBT+ community) for whom the idea of an Arab-Muslim identity is at least ambivalent or even causes identity conflicts.

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