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Who defines moderation? Adapting Islamist and Salafi identities in Tunisia to a changing religio-political field

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ABSTRACT
The idea of Tunisian 'moderation' as an essential constituent part of national identity has been historically used by autocratic governments as an instrument of securitization, investing the state with the unique authority to suppress movements – in practice, usually the Islamist opposition – deemed antithetical to this identity and thus threatening to the nation and its people. This paper explores how, after the Arab Uprisings in 2010–2011, diverse groups of Islamists responded to pre-existing discourses of Tunisian national identity as moderate. After the revolution, Tunisian Islamists and Salafis initially both contested the assumptions behind pre-revolutionary conceptualizations of national identity that had previously excluded them from the boundaries of normative citizenship by reframing the nature of the threat or attempting to redefine and expand the nature of moderation. Both groups encountered different outcomes in their attempts to recalibrate the notions of identity, religion and the state. These divergences can be traced to their differing ideologies, political situations and incentives. Nevertheless, the fact that each group engaged with – rather than dismissed – this discourse suggests the centrality of the state-moderation-security nexus in structuring past and present conceptualizations of Tunisian moderation.

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Introducing Tunisian moderation

While the notion of Tunisian 'moderation' was often invoked during the country's revolutionary trajectory as an explanation for its successful democratization, the history of this concept predates the 2010–2011 Arab Uprisings. Under the governance of Habib Bourguiba, Tunisia's first president after independence from France, Tunisian moderation became a mantra for

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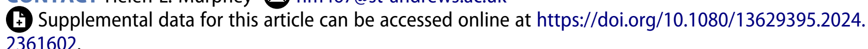
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its constructed image of modernity, including a French-style policy of *laic* state secularism and the elimination of any threats to this moderate identity. Protecting Tunisian moderation thus hinged upon the existence of a strong state guarding against 'extremism'.

The idea that there is a moderate quality specific to Tunisia is often articulated using the term *tunisianité*. The origins of the term refer to a reformist outlook that was not at odds with pan-Islamism (Wehrey & Boukhars, 2019, p. 86). However, as the Bourguiba regime (1957–1987) attempted to disempower traditional religious institutions and institute new legal codes, it also inaugurated a secularization project tied to a wider programme of modern state-building (Wehrey & Boukhars, 2019, pp. 88–89). The discourse of Tunisian identity increasingly juxtaposed progress – in the sense of a modern, European-influenced prosperity – with traditional religious authorities. As associated with public religion instead of *laïcité*, with the Middle East rather than Europe, and with the transnational Muslim community, the *ummah*, rather than national borders, Islamists and Salafis formed the primary antagonist against which *laic tunisianité* could be symbolically opposed. At the same time, this allowed Islamist groups to imbue political criticism with religious symbolism.

These associations persisted after Bourguiba through the Ben Ali regime (1987–2011). While Ben Ali initially seemed inclined to relax restrictions on the Islamist opposition, he substantially grew the security apparatus and further stigmatized Islamist movements by associating them with a fundamentalism external to Tunisian Islam. The media under Ben Ali, as Boukhars writes, generally painted Islamism as a 'foreign import and a great menace to the national essence' which targeted the fabric of Tunisian society through '[manipulating] religious symbols' (Boukhars, 2014, p. 5). Moreover, Ben Ali brought in an economic angle: he portrayed stability as vital to Tunisia's middle-class economy and presented Islamism as a potential existential threat. This allowed him to garner some popular support for his repressive measures and contributed to polarization. After the Arab Uprisings, however, Islamist parties became legalized, and the political field opened substantially. Suddenly, previously untouchable concepts became contested. What was the role of the state in preserving stability and moderation, and how were these concepts to be defined? For the first time, Islamists were able to engage with this process in newly opened public spaces.

Yet as Sami Zemni notes, *tunisianité* was still used to demarcate acceptable and unacceptable political actors after the revolution (Zemni, 2016, pp. 144–147). Indeed, accusations against Islamists and Salafis have rested on the idea that – due to how they present religion – they constitute un-Tunisian foreign imports. How did Islamists and Salafis respond to debates surrounding this view of Tunisian identity? To answer this question, I will first explore how Tunisian identity has been historically linked to moderation through the securitization

practices of the Bourguiba and Ben Ali regimes, which symbolically emphasized the nation's vulnerability and the regime's protective responsibility. I then examine how, after the revolution, Islamist and Salafi political parties reworked this securitized discourse to advance their own definitions of 'moderation' and Tunisian national identity between 2011 and 2016. I focus on two political actors: the Islamist party Ennahda and the Salafi party Jabhat al-Islah (the Reform Front). While Ennahda has been a major political player in the post-revolutionary political arena, Jabhat al-Islah has been electorally peripheral, despite the Salafi movement receiving considerable attention. While both groups advanced initially distinct but complementary notions of moderation, Ennahda later moved towards a more securitized definition of Tunisian identity. A comparison between the two thus provides insights into how internal divisions within the Islamist current – as well as differences in influence – impacted contestations over the boundaries of the 'moderate' centre.

In this paper, I argue that these actors both advanced narrative variants which relied on Tunisian moderation as an inclusive and natural principle. In the immediate wake of the Arab Uprisings, Ennahda and Jabhat al-Islah argued that inclusion would spur moderation. However, as jihadi terror attacks escalated and a backlash emerged against Salafis, Ennahda began to cleave to the original Bourguibist idea of Tunisian moderation as necessitating the exclusion of the extreme 'Other'. For its part, Jabhat al-Islah began to contest the state as the guarantor of the moderation-security nexus. This indicates significant diversity among the Islamist current in how normative national identity was experienced. It also suggests that even after the revolution, the trope of a moderate citizenry threatened by ideological extremism persisted, limiting the opportunities for political inclusion of those cast as 'Other'. More broadly, it illuminates how the securitization of Tunisian identity as moderate structured Islamists' and Salafis' engagement in the political sphere, even as they contested its boundaries.

Methodology

This paper adopts a comparative analytical framework comparing the moderation discourses advanced by Ennahda and Jabhat al-Islah. Through discourse analysis, a methodology which relies on placing textual themes in a historic and political context, I seek to understand how moderation as a discourse was engaged with by the Islamist actors that it had previously excluded. I begin with a theoretical contribution to the literature on Tunisian moderation and its attending implications of securitization. I then analyse how this discourse was reworked by Ennahda and Jabhat al-Islah through examining 34 social media posts from 2011–2016 from Ennahda, Jabhat al-Islah and their members, supplemented by an analysis of five interviews with Ennahda leader Rachid al-Ghannouchi which were published in secondary

sources. These posts and interviews were selected for their engagement with the theme of moderation or Tunisian identity. A thematic framework for analysis was developed inductively based on the motifs referred to in these sources. I identified six coexisting and overlapping themes: moderation as innate, moderation as threatened, reorienting the moderate/centrist position, moderation as pluralism or individual liberty, moderation as a bulwark against secular extremism, and self-presentation of oneself as an agent assisting in moderation processes.

There are benefits to leveraging social media as a tool for analysis. For modern political movements, social media presents an unmediated way to communicate with their constituents. According to Elizabeth Monier, Facebook as a platform '[categorises] and [organises] users of social media' (Monier, 2018, p. 209), playing a role in shaping interpretive communities and discourses. It also provides a valuable archive for exploratory research of how concepts were instrumentalized in a given historical moment. In essence, a discourse analysis of Facebook posts proffers a snapshot of how events were represented in relation to the historic and political pressures and opportunities that existed at the time.

At the same time, there are limitations to what can be deduced from this approach. Social media posts tell very little about the interiority of the actors in question, and – taken uncritically – risk presenting the narratives advanced by a group as factual. As Geoff Martin notes, there are dangers with assuming social media directly mirrors occurrences on the ground (Martin, 2018). Analysing the activities of a political party or movement using social media content can also be fraught; social media pronouncements necessarily favour some voices over others (Monier, 2018, p. 215). For example, social media may over-emphasize the opinions of leadership over the rank and file.

Despite these limitations, this paper's goal is to explore Islamist groups' engagement with the discourse of Tunisian moderation in the public sphere. As such, it chiefly concerns party leaders' external narratives rather than any internal or private ambiguities. Qualitative research on social media in the region has highlighted this method's utility for determining how narratives are publicly presented (e.g., Harlow, 2013). As such, this paper treats this content as a reflection of how the political leadership of Ennahda and Jabhat al-Islah engaged with the discourse of Tunisian moderation; it does not advance anything resembling an authoritative explanation of their internal beliefs nor does it purport to characterize or essentialize either party in its entirety.

Tunisianité, moderation and security

This work brings together the theoretical insights of Hibou (2011) on security as a practice of legitimation by the pre-revolutionary state with the work of

Cavatorta and Merone (2015), Zemni (2016) and Helal (2019) on the normative nature of *tunisianité* and moderation. Together, these analyses point to the creation of a hegemonic discourse of national identity premised on the existence of an existential extremist threat requiring securitization. In contrast to more structurally-oriented explanations, studies of the securitization of Tunisian identity suggest how this discourse – and its links to Tunisia's perceived prosperity and open-mindedness – have assisted in manufacturing consent for authoritarianism. At the same time, this discursive approach also accounts for how contestation and debate around the same principles emerged in the public sphere after the revolution.

According to Helal, *tunisianité* is premised on a perceived Tunisian distinctiveness and exceptionality (Helal, 2019, p. 416). Moderation has been one reified characteristic of this identity, with Islamism set in contradistinction to the Tunisian populace. The process of identity construction often necessitates the correlating creation of an 'out-group'. Cavatorta and Torelli (2021) and Zemni (2016) note how *tunisianité* functioned as a marker for normative inclusion and exclusion, signifying who could be treated as a citizen. Religion became a key aspect within this construction. The existence of a non-threatening 'Tunisian Islam' was central to the construction of an aberrant un-Tunisian Islam associated with Islamism (Young, 2018, p. 35). Yet the nature of this boundary merits further comment. How was the divide between the Tunisian and non-Tunisian enforced? If moderation was an inherent quality of Tunisian identity, how was it protected from 'extreme' encroachments?

In Tunisia's political history, preservation of a 'moderate' national identity has been linked to autocratic projects predicated on repression of 'extreme' threats. Hibou (2011) analyses how the necessity to safeguard Tunisia's moderate identity can be linked to the longevity of its authoritarian regimes. This moderation is portrayed by the government as having economic, as well as political, implications. She notes how the fear of Islamism as an antagonist was necessary for the regime to present itself as the protector of a prosperous middle-class lifestyle for the populace (Hibou, 2011, pp. 182–183). The efficacy of this strategy of legitimation rested in how such state practices became internalized by some citizens as an embodiment of their own intent through an entrenched 'myth of consensus' (Hibou, 2011, p. 203). *Tunisianité* was thus inherently underwritten by uneven regime-citizen relations and inequality between citizens, and maintained by a security apparatus repressing 'extreme' threats.

While aspects of this essentialised discourse persisted after the democratic transition in 2011 (Helal, 2019), new actors, including Ennahda and other Islamists, attempted to put forth their own definitions of Tunisian identity (Zemni, 2016, pp. 143–144). Cavatorta and Merone argue that Ennahda's moderation process is understandable through reference to the discourse of *tunisianité*, which allowed the party to draw upon

a Tunisian experience linked to a broader Maghrebi religio-intellectual ethos of a reformist Islamism open to democratic philosophies as well as procedures (Cavatorta & Merone, 2015, pp. 36–37). Rather than associate themselves with the transnational Islamist trend, they redefined how a markedly Tunisian Islamism could complement – rather than dominate or displace – the diverse views within Tunisia's political sphere (Cavatorta & Merone, 2015, p. 37). Similarly, Merone (2017) analyses the trajectory of Salafi-jihadi group Ansar al-Sharia, detailing two contradictory trends: a subtype seeking sociopolitical change in Tunisia as a nation and a *takfiri*, internationalist strand. This juxtaposition similarly relies upon a more 'moderate' Tunisian identity as a counterpoint to transnationally-oriented extremism.

Taken together, the bodies of literature on Tunisian national identity and state legitimation suggest the centrality of mythmaking within a discourse in which moderation is portrayed as both inherent to the Tunisian people and under threat. Consequently, a strong and unassailable security apparatus is the mechanism by which this boundary is policed. As Hibou (2011) argues, this view of identity became hegemonic and assisted the authoritarian Ben Ali regime in legitimizing repression. Yet when this state structure was challenged by the revolution, how did discourses shift? While Helal (2019) suggests that elements of this exclusionary discourse remained in media coverage, Zemni (2016) argues that the demands of post-revolutionary political culture led to considerable contestation. Within these broader debates, Cavatorta and Merone (2015) show that these conversations occurred among Islamists as agents as well as subjects. Building on this body of research, this paper addresses the question: as Islamists and Salafis engaged with the concept of Tunisian moderation in this shifting discursive field, which elements were retained, and which aspects were challenged or reworked?

This paper engages with Helal's approach to Tunisian moderation as a discourse, which I place in conversation with Hibou's focus on the authoritarian state's legitimation tactics. I argue that the state-moderation-security dynamic was challenged by Islamist groups after the 2010–2011 revolution as they advanced new formulations of what a 'moderate' national identity might constitute. Instead of relying upon moderation as a vulnerable attribute, they posited it as an innate result of political openness. While Ennahda portrayed itself as part of a reconfigured consensus, Jabhat al-Islah represented itself as an instrument of moderation through its outreach to Salafi youth. Yet this process was complicated by persistent security issues in the post-revolutionary era, forcing a reckoning between the Islamists' expansive (and expanding) notion of Tunisian moderation and its traditional securitized iteration, pointing to the ambiguities that result when subjects of prior securitization seek to present themselves as legitimate actors within these same discourses.

This touches upon wider debates about the transnational and local dimensions of Islamism and Salafism. The extent of Ennahda's (and its predecessor organizations') historic ideational links to the transnational Muslim Brotherhood has been oft-debated (e.g., Wolf, 2017, p. 40). Even moreso, Salafism's transnational focus is often emphasized as one of its core components (Roy, 2004, pp. 24–25, 149). Yet local forms of Salafism suggest a more complicated picture. Wehrey and Boukhars' (2019) exploration of Salafism in the Maghreb has unearthed indigenous histories of Salafism alongside transnational connections. This paper centres how Islamist and Salafi actors are, in practice, imbricated in local pre-existing discourses and their accompanying structures. Faced with mistrust, engagement with this discourse – through underscoring the local – allowed Islamist and Salafi groups the possibility of a place within the normative Tunisian public sphere. This paper thus contributes to existing studies of the transnational in Islamism and Salafism by examining how securitized national identities such as *tunisianité* present partitions that can be contested and even reworked as Islamist and Salafi groups emphasize their local orientations.

Centring the state in the moderation-security bargain

The moderation-security bargain constructed under Bourguiba and Ben Ali necessitated a strong state to defend against challenges to the national project. Seeking to create a 'modern', European-influenced Tunisia, Bourguiba used top-down measures after independence to restructure traditional religious and cultural mores. His Personal Status Code elevated European legal practices over Islamic traditions emanating from Tunisia's customary Maliki legal school; religious schools were shuttered as the education system became brought under the aegis of the state (Sofi, 2018, pp. 251–252). Religion was permitted insofar as it facilitated a common identity, but Bourguiba was sceptical of religious authorities' independent institutional power and eager to curb traditions that he feared might inhibit the country's economic trajectory, though he still felt bound to reinterpret – rather than dismiss – religious legitimacy. His attempt to abolish fasting for Ramadan to improve the country's economics was anchored in religious justifications as a 'jihad against underdevelopment' with references to the example of the Prophet Muhammad (Wolf, 2017, p. 30). Bourguiba's presidency was characterized by his monopolization of authority, including religious interpretive power, and the deliberate absence of any political rivals (Mullin & Rouabah, 2016, p. 165).

While Bourguiba had previously constructed this state-building project in opposition to Arab Nationalism and Nasserism (Mullin & Rouabah, 2016, p. 157; Perkins, 2013, pp. 146–147), Islamism soon assumed the role *par excellence* of antagonist. However, this top-down privatization of Islam was unsuccessful in winning over much of the religious population (Boulby, 1988,

pp. 595–596). Consequently, combined religio-political discontent birthed an Islamist opposition who contested the 'state monopoly over religious symbolism' as well as governmental retaliation against dissidents (McCarthy, 2014, p. 746). Indeed, the history of Ennahda is intertwined with intermittent government repression. Founded as the Islamic Tendency Movement (MTI), Ennahda combined political oppositionality with the goal of Islamizing society. For example, Islamists made common cause with secular groups and pushed for pluralist democracy whilst also advocating a revitalization of grassroots piety – a direct contestation of the state-driven redefinition of Islam inherent to the Bourguibist project (Meddeb, 2019, pp. 3–5). This alternative reformulation of religion's societal role was met with repression, leading to exile or imprisonment for many members.

Through associating Islamism with backwardness and instability, the state designated it as an existential threat. The late 1980s saw Islamists portrayed as both akin to Iranian Revolution partisans, as well as culturally threatening reactionaries seeking to undo Bourguiba's modernization project (Vandewalle, 1988, p. 612). Similarly, contention that occurred for predominantly economic reasons – for example, the riots resulting from the government's (swiftly recalled) decision to acquiesce to the World Bank and remove its bread subsidy – were blamed on the MTI (Perkins, 2013, pp. 172–173). The holistic nature of the Bourguibist socio-political modernization project equally allowed Islamist groups to protest societal inequalities by presenting an alternative frame (Waltz, 1986, pp. 665–666). For Islamists, Bourguiba was the inauthentic actor: his perceived elitist Francophone tendencies became an inversion of true Tunisian identity, as the religious opposition rejected Bourguiba's Tunisian-as-European model and instead asserted its Arab and Muslim ties (Zederman, 2015, p. 49). Bourguiba's statist project necessitated the construction of the Islamist threat, but this was a double-edged sword: for those disillusioned by Bourguibism, Islamism became an ideology of protest.

By 1987, after Zine el Abidine Ben Ali facilitated Bourguiba's removal and assumed power, some considered that the new president might be willing to include Islamists in his conceptualization of normative Tunisian identity. When Ben Ali allowed for restricted political participation, the MTI retitled itself Harakat Ennahda (the Ennahda movement) and sought to join in the 1989 elections as independents. The independent Islamists achieved surprisingly impressive results, alarming a regime which had severely underestimated the movement's popularity (Meddeb, 2019, p. 5). Ben Ali responded by instituting a new wave of repression, resulting in the exclusion of political Islam from the Tunisian public sphere until the revolution (Meddeb, 2019, p. 6). An interview with Ben Ali from 1998 illustrates how Islamism became constructed as threatening to Tunisia's growing prosperity and developmental aspirations; Ben Ali differentiates Islam, 'the religion of almost all Tunisians, a religion of conviviality, love of one's neighbour, moderation and tolerance'

from the 'distorted use that is made of Islam by fundamentalist and terrorist movements' (Geyer, 1998). This idea of aberration provided the groundwork for Ben Ali's tendency to portray security measures as a necessary safeguard for preserving the 'authentic' (de-politicized) Tunisian Islam (McCarthy, 2014, p. 743). Ben Ali's strategy constituted a return to an exclusionary state policy, but also involved new measures of surveillance and repression as he augmented the security apparatus (Erdle, 2020, p. 147), which was frequently deployed against the Islamist opposition.

The 2000s saw the ascent of quietist Salafism. While Islamist movements faced repression under Bourguiba and Ben Ali, most Salafis had been politically acquiescent (Wehrey & Boukhars, 2019, p. 82). Some had been associated with the MTI, though many disassociated relatively early due to an aversion to institutional politics (Wolf, 2017, p. 122). Nevertheless, with Ennahda dispersed, the 2000s saw a wave of religiosity that created a climate more favourable to decentralized quietist Salafism. Public piety in the form of symbols – such as the headscarf – symbolically asserted claims to both religious interpretation and a right to occupy public space as a visibly devout person; such disputes increasingly became entangled in culture war divides (Wehrey & Boukhars, 2019, p. 92). On a broader level, however, the modernization-Westernization association came to be viewed with greater scepticism, with many Tunisians lamenting a disintegration of a shared 'identity', starkly contrasting the perceived authenticity of Islamism with the crony capitalism of Ben Ali and his associates (Wolf, 2017, p. 110).

By the eve of the 2010–2011 revolution, Islamism had been associated with resistance to the Bourguiba and Ben Ali regimes and, consequently, with securitization. In turn, decades of oppression imparted an oppositional aura to Islamist groups (Zeghal, 2013, pp. 258–259). Once the religio-political field opened, the Islamist current could leverage this oppositionality into political weight, and thereby contest the link between state power and post-revolutionary Tunisian identity, which frequently coalesced into reworking the idea of 'moderation'.

Article 6 of the post-revolutionary Tunisian Constitution suggests that a significant shift occurred in the state-religion relationship. The state is simultaneously the 'guardian of religion' yet ensures 'freedom of consciousness and belief' and 'the neutrality of mosques and places of worship from all partisan instrumentalisation' (Constitution of Tunisia, 2014). This indicates that the state retains its authority as a regulator but, in contrast to the state secularist era, does not claim authority over substantive interpretations. At the same time, the characterization that follows of Tunisian Islam owes much to prior assumptions of Tunisian moderation, retaining the state's responsibility 'to disseminate the values of moderation and tolerance and the protection of the sacred, and the prohibitions of all violations thereof. It undertakes equally to prohibit and fight against calls for Takfir and the incitement of violence and hatred' (Constitution of

Tunisia, 2014). This also points to a redefinition of 'moderation'. Indeed, this article implicitly defines a wide spectrum of acceptability: it excludes extremist calls for takfir (considering a Muslim non-Muslim due to their actions) as well as attacks on the sacred. This constitution, produced after a series of debates between Islamist and secularist actors, reflects the tension over who characterizes 'moderation' and thus lays claim to a normative national identity. Article 1, which establishes Tunisia as Islamic and linguistically Arabic, as Zeghal notes, was largely uncontested by most mainstream secularist and Islamist political actors due to its vague phrasing (Zeghal, 2013, p. 260). How did this reflect dialogues around moderation and Tunisian identity which emerged after the revolution?

In 2011, an amnesty was issued to both Islamist and Salafi actors, legitimizing their political participation. Consequently, Ennahda members began to mobilize successfully for the autumn 2011 elections. Some Salafis formed political organizations, including the party Jabhat al-Islah (JI). Even Salafi-jihadis such as Abu Iyadh, the leader of Ansar al-Sharia (AST), explored the idea of utilizing the public sphere, even if electoral party politics were rejected. However, this opportunity was necessarily shaped in dialogue with other actors. A strong secularist movement – and an accompanying historic scepticism of political Islam (Zeghal, 2013, p. 262) – created a tense climate for Islamist movements to navigate. Most immediately, this involved a reckoning with how Islamists and Salafis could align themselves with Tunisian national identity while contesting historic narratives of securitization, particularly regarding the hegemonic nature of what Tunisian 'moderation' entailed. Ennahda and Jabhat al-Islah advanced a new discourse of moderation as an intrinsic attribute tied to Tunisia's natural character; in this view, a Tunisian moderate identity was expansive, with room for Islamists and secularists alike. The Salafi-jihadi current's rising influence, however, prompted both Ennahda and Jabhat al-Islah to further adjust their constructions of normative Tunisian moderation by reworking and reintegrating elements of exclusion, albeit in different ways.

Moderation as a reconfigured 'centre ground': Ennahda's post-revolutionary development

As a well-organized opposition group, Ennahda was initially very successful in mobilizing voters. Nevertheless, in the name of unity it promised to govern by coalition, regardless of voter results, a promise which it upheld. In representing themselves as legitimate Tunisian actors, Ennahda members also distanced themselves from the Muslim Brotherhood. Marks' (2015) interviews with Ennahda members evidence their hesitation to align themselves with the international Islamist organization, particularly its Egyptian iteration. Indeed, even members who admitted a degree of historic affinity emphasized their differences through Tunisia's 'open' national identity (Marks, 2015, p. 3).

One MP unfavourably contrasted the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood's decision to assume leadership without a coalition to Ennahda's approach (Marks, 2015, p. 3). For its part, Ennahda promised that it '[would] not govern alone' (Ḥarakat al-Nahḍah al-Tūnisiyyah, 2011) and emphasized its high valuation of consensus and openness (Ḥarakat al-Nahḍah al-Tūnisiyyah, 2012a), which seemed aimed to combat secularist fears that Islamists were committed only to majoritarian democracy.

Moderation as an intrinsic force

Ennahda contested the moderation-security association by presenting moderation as inevitably accompanying political freedom. Violence was posited as a *result* of the state attempting to enforce a misguided view of moderation. According to Ghannouchi, extremism, such as the Salafi-jihadi current, represented a corruption, a 'legacy of Ben Ali, of dictatorship' (Hearst, 2016). In contrast, Tunisia's openness and tolerance was positioned as natural, due to its geographical location and the diverse flows this situation engendered. Within Tunisia, he argued, was a 'unified' population with 'plurality in thought and culture' (Hearst, 2016). In Ghannouchi's words, the Arab world had previously been 'living outside history', while now the Tunisian democratic experience could serve as a model 'showing that it is possible to have democracy in the Arab world and that it is possible to have democracy in Islam' (Kaplan, 2017).

Ennahda was able to point to itself as an indicator of the inherently moderating power of Tunisian identity. Ennahda member Sayida Ounissi characterizes the party's historical ideational connection to the Muslim Brotherhood as a re-evaluation of the 'food for thought' of Muslim Brotherhood content within the 'unique, local ideological environment' of Tunisia (Ounissi, 2016, p. 3). Ghannouchi, too, has embedded Ennahda's genealogy within Tunisian and Maghrebi intellectual history and Islamic reformism. He has pointed to the ideas of Hayreddin Pasha, a nineteenth-century *beylerbeyi* of Tunisia, who argued that religion could selectively accommodate beneficial new ideas, even if they had foreign origins (Kaplan, 2017). Similarly, Ghannouchi has characterized the Islamic tradition by its prioritization of 'harmony between the religion, thought and the general interest'; he draws on the Andalusian scholar ibn Rashed's interpretive approach to justify democracy as the optimal method to secure 'the consensus that is the main pillar of an Islamic regime' (Ghannouchi et al., 2012, p. 8). Ounissi also has referred back to the 'rationalist approach' developed within Zaytouna of Sheikh Tahar Ben Achour, who elevated the concept of *maqasid al-shariah* (the goals of shariah) rather than purely literal interpretations (Ounissi, 2016, p. 2). For Ghannouchi, the influence of the Tunisian environment had profoundly

impacted Tunisian Islamists' gradual approach (Ghannouchi, 2013b). By referring to a long history of Maghrebi, and particularly Tunisian, Islamic moderation, Ennahda was able to present itself as both part of the normative Tunisian character and authentically Islamic.

This influenced its approach to more ideologically radical Islamist movements. Initially, Ennahda harboured optimism towards the Salafi trend. Using Ennahda's own trajectory as a parable, Ghannouchi argued that the Tunisian socio-political environment would necessarily have a moderating effect upon the Salafi movement's more extreme elements (Cavatorta, 2015, p. 771). Indeed, Salafism was seen as incited by 'Ben Ali's secular extremism' (Ghannouchi, 2012a); the measures taken by the former regimes had 'left a tremendous religious vacuum' (Ghannouchi, 2012b). As Salafism had originally emerged and developed in a 'climate of repression', 'freedom' was needed to address it (Ghannouchi, 2012b). In contrast, 'demonisation' (*shayṭanah*) might result in Salafis' eventually attaining power (France 24, 2012), suggesting that moderation was a natural process which repression could obstruct. In this way, Ghannouchi posited Tunisian moderation as a feature of society that would inherently temper or marginalize movements in opposition to it (Ghannouchi, 2012d). The unfettered Tunisian character could thus be an agent *propelling* moderation.

Consequently, the party advocated for dialogue with Salafis who were open to it, rather than indiscriminate securitization (Ḥarakat al-Nahḍah al-Tūnisiyyah, 2012b). As polarized tensions heightened, Ghannouchi urged Salafi activists to adopt non-contentious strategies; he also suggested formal political participation in the template of Jabhat al-Islah (Boukhars, 2014, p. 17). The party upheld this approach even at reputational cost. A leaked video of Ghannouchi seeking to reach out to Salafis – including statements that despite Ennahda's electoral success, there was still heavy secularist institutional influence, necessitating caution – attracted opprobrium from the opposition and accusations that Ennahda was operating in a two-faced manner (Al-Jazeera, 2012; Mizouri, 2012). Ghannouchi maintained that the video was 'taken out of context' (Wright, 2012) and that he was urging a moderate and peaceful approach (Ghannouchi, 2012b). As Monica Marks argues, this video did not inherently clash with Ennahda's more public messaging: as she claims, 'Ennahda has repeatedly attempted to address the Salafis in inclusive, almost pacifying terms, stressing that they are part of the fabric of Tunisian society, and entreating them to consider a more patient, gradualist approach to Islamizing reforms' (Jacinto, 2012). Due perhaps to memories of state repression, belief in the inclusivity of the discourse of moderation, as well as worries of a counter-revolution, Ennahda was slow to act decisively even against growing Salafi-jihadi proselytism and mobilization (Rosenblatt, 2019, pp. 11–12) despite sharpening polarization.

Reorienting the moderate/centrist position

Another tactic whereby Ennahda redefined moderation was through what Esen Kirdiş refers to as 'redefining the political centre' (Kirdiş, 2019, p. 123). In the Tunisian case, this entailed portraying itself as a true centrist by defending unimpeded religiosity as part of mainstream Tunisian identity. Ghannouchi referenced two polarities: those more conservative than Ennahda and 'radical secularists' situated 'to the left of moderate secular forces' who sought 'a constitution that contradicts the Tunisian people's identity' (Ghannouchi, 2014). Some secularist currents were associated with the deposed government. Nidaa Tounes in particular was cast as 'more dangerous' than the Salafi current due to its links with the Ben Ali regime (Ghannouchi, 2012c). By presenting itself as navigating a middle path, Ennahda staked a claim as to what this consisted of, similarly to how the Turkish AKP stylized itself as speaking for the 'pious majority' (Kirdiş, 2019, p. 141). Similarly, Ghannouchi claimed that 'Ennahda can represent this centre of ordinary Tunisians within the middle and lower class' (Hearst, 2016).

Ennahda has demonstrated this commitment to occupying an accepted centre ground through emphasizing its past and present openness to compromise. Ghannouchi referenced the inclusive nature of the October 18 Coalition, which was established in 2005 in opposition to Ben Ali and included Ennahda as well as numerous secular actors, to highlight its commitment to consensus (Ghannouchi, 2012c). Another emblematic example is the dialogue over the wording of the post-revolutionary Constitution. How Ennahda would define the role of shariah was a highly charged subject (Wolf, 2017, p. 139). Consequently, Ennahda held several meetings to articulate its position, with members acknowledging the ambiguities inherent in Islamic law and the topic's discordant potential (Wolf, 2017, p. 139). Ultimately, it endorsed the compromise embodied by the Constitution to include references to Islam but not shariah (Meddeb, 2019, p. 8). This was consistent with its view of religion as 'identity-based' rather than a blueprint for governance (Cavatorta & Merone, 2013, p. 861). Ghannouchi referred to the party's willingness to cooperate across ideological lines and its prioritization of consensus as evidence of its commitment to democracy and Tunisia's well-being (Ghannouchi, 2014). Regarding the Constitution, he noted that there were those on either side of the spectrum who advocated for more extreme wording; the document thus ultimately reflected 'the victory of the middle' (Ghannouchi, 2014). As Ghannouchi stated, the Constitution needed to belong to an 'entire people' rather than a single view (Ghannouchi, 2013a). Ennahda's stance was thus aligned with both the people's desires and with a larger centrist worldview.

Similarly, Ennahda has been keen to demonstrate its commitment to a moderate position on women's rights, historically a key symbol of Islamist-

secularist polarization. Anxieties over potential evasion or ambiguity surrounding genuine legal gender equality plagued the democratic transition (Wolf, 2017, pp. 140–141). According to Ghannouchi, however, Ennahda had affirmed the Personal Status Code since the late 1980s (Ghannouchi, 2011) and in 2012, then-Prime Minister Hamadi Jebali of Ennahda committed his party to defending the rights of those who choose to dress in bikinis or consume alcohol (Wolf, 2017, pp. 3–4). The 2014 Constitution, which Ennahda accepted, enshrined the principle of equality rather than equity (Wolf, 2017, p. 141). This is significant, given the emphasis on complementarity of rights traditionally proposed by many conservative religious actors (Welchman, 2012). It was within this context that Ghannouchi stated that women's rights had become 'part of Tunisian identity', and it was therefore Ennahda's task to reconcile this outlook with its religious interpretation (Wolf, 2017, p. 141).

A return to moderation as vulnerability

The post-revolutionary political scene saw a number of pressures act on Ennahda to further refine their self-identification as moderate, pushing them closer to the centre as defined in contradistinction to the Salafi trend. Global attention to Salafi-jihadism, as manifested by the Islamic State (IS) and in terrorist attacks within Tunisia, seemed to implicate transnational political Islam as a potent danger. Indeed, Ghannouchi contextualized Ennahda's decision to refer to itself as a party of Muslim Democrats through categorically contrasting it from IS: '[o]ne of the reasons that I do not need to belong to political Islam, is that Daesh is part of this political Islam' (Hearst, 2016). He emphasized that Ennahda and IS held antithetical beliefs, arguing that his own party believed in democracy while Daesh was 'another face of dictatorship' (Hearst, 2016).

Nevertheless, this did not involve abdicating claims on the religio-political field. To the contrary, this was a zero-sum game over the interpretation of Islam, where he posited his party as the 'real alternative to Daesh' (Hearst, 2016). Nevertheless, Sayida Ounissi acknowledged that Ennahda was in a position where they had to "make [their] differences with ISIS and other extremists clear to all' (Ounissi, 2016, p. 8); the use of 'Muslim Democrat' was intended to brand the party as similar to Christian Democratic parties in Europe, rejecting associations with transnational anti-systemism without abandoning religious politics (Ounissi, 2016, p. 7). The idea of moderation as an intrinsic logic did not disappear – Ghannouchi advanced that Tunisia, by virtue of the moderate character of its citizenry, could not become Daesh, stating that '[t]his ideology can not [*sic*] be mobilised in Tunisia' (Hearst, 2016) – but it became modified, as some violent actors were posited to exist beyond Tunisia's moderating power.

Consequently, it drew a sharper line between itself and the Salafi current after a series of attacks and assassinations. In particular, the assassinations of left-wing opposition politicians Chokri Belaid and Mohamed Brahmi incited widespread protests, putting pressure on the Troika government (Al-Naẓīf, 2013; BBC, 2013) as demonstrators revived the revolutionary slogan 'The people want the fall of the regime' (France 24, 2013). Within Ennahda, Minister of the Interior and later Prime Minister Ali al-Laarayedh had voiced scepticism towards AST's activities and warned of the threat it might pose (Rosenblatt, 2019, p. 11); these events – alongside an increase in terrorist attacks by jihadi groups – prompted the rest of the government to follow suit (Wehrey & Boukhars, 2019, p. 104). Indeed, Ennahda began to support the calls for implementing greater security measures; AST was officially classified as a terrorist organization in 2013. After this, Ennahda itself began to lean closer to the centre, even eventually cooperating with the anti-Islamist secularist party Nidaa Tounes.

Contesting the boundaries of moderation: Salafi politics in post-revolutionary Tunisia

The rise of political and other forms of activist Salafism in Tunisia after the Arab Uprisings came as a surprise for many theorists, given the preponderance of the quietist and jihadi trends. Within Tunisia, the ideological movement faced intimations that it was a 'foreign conspiracy' which appeared to contradict Tunisia's storied 'modernisation' (Wolf, 2017, p. 143). Nevertheless, several Salafis organized into political parties; Jabhat al-Islah (JI) was officially licenced in 2012. Political Salafis like Jabhat al-Islah were eager to position themselves as part of an Islamic current aligned with the revolutionary aim of contesting the secular security state of Bourguiba and Ben Ali. However, the growth of Salafi-jihadism posed fundamental challenges for political Salafis working within the political system who saw themselves as attempting to moderate this more contentious milieu; this ideological affinity rendered them less capable of representing themselves as part of the 'moderate centre' than Ennahda.

Salafis as agents of moderation

Like Ennahda, Jabhat al-Islah also adopted the idea that moderation could be naturally occurring. Yet while Ennahda portrayed moderation as a natural characteristic of Tunisian identity and believed in its self-perpetuating quality within a free environment, Jabhat al-Islah went further to situate their own political project in this conceptualization by emphasizing their abilities to strengthen the moderation process. Jabhat al-Islah leader Muhammad Khouja suggested that some of the post-revolutionary unrest was a result

of youth populations feeling unheard. He offered that Jabhat al-Islah could help some of these young people to productively contribute to 'the construction of the new Tunisia' (Le Parisien, 2012). Inclusion in the political system was viewed as a sign of behavioural moderation; Khouja emphasized the party had a role in redirecting the zeal of Salafi youth away from disruptive contention (Ḥizb Jabhat al-'Iṣlāḥ al-Ṣafḥah al-Rasmiyyah, 2013i, 2014a). Within this framing, Jabhat al-Islah thus presented itself as an agent assisting the broader aim of moderating the unruly Salafi current, a project which required an open public sphere. In response to controversies in which contentious Salafi currents were involved, the party often advocated for dialogues, with the inclusion of Salafis and religious figures (Ḥizb Jabhat al-'Iṣlāḥ al-Ṣafḥah al-Rasmiyyah, 2013a). The imposition of disproportionate security constraints, in contrast, was considered an inappropriate response to such crises. Jabhat al-Islah warned against practices implying that the country was 'in a state of war' (Ḥizb Jabhat al-'Iṣlāḥ al-Ṣafḥah al-Rasmiyyah, 2013a). Party members emphasized that an ideological affiliation like Salafism should not entail *a priori* discrimination (e.g., Ḥizb Jabhat al-'Iṣlāḥ al-Ṣafḥah al-Rasmiyyah, 2014c). After AST was pronounced a terrorist organization, JI voiced concern over the possibility of 'mass arrests based on dissenting thought or a particular appearance' and expressed fear of a resurgent security campaign (Ḥizb Jabhat al-'Iṣlāḥ al-Ṣafḥah al-Rasmiyyah, 2013d).

In facilitating links with the Salafi grassroots, Jabhat al-Islah's ideological rigour became a tool in furthering the moderating project. While JI characterized the Salafi approach itself as moderate (Ḥizb Jabhat al-'Iṣlāḥ al-Ṣafḥah al-Rasmiyyah, 2013f), it nevertheless emphasized the party's ideological steadfastness. For example, while Ennahda was willing to give up any direct references to shariah in the constitution, Jabhat al-Islah considered that a constitutional commitment to shariah was necessary to restore a virtuous society (Ḥizb Jabhat al-'Iṣlāḥ al-Ṣafḥah al-Rasmiyyah, 2012e, 2013i). Party rhetoric aligned this project with Tunisia's identity (Ḥizb Jabhat al-'Iṣlāḥ al-Ṣafḥah al-Rasmiyyah, 2012b, 2013i). This framing of what it meant to be Tunisian, however, was divisive, particularly in view of the Islamist-secularist contention troubling the public sphere. Indeed, Jabhat al-Islah's public communications frequently addressed the many controversies associated with the Salafi grassroots (e.g., Ḥizb Jabhat al-'Iṣlāḥ al-Ṣafḥah al-Rasmiyyah, 2012a, 2012d).

Moreover, Jabhat al-Islah's mediation strategy was unconvincing to much of the unaffiliated Salafi current (Zelin, 2013). Many Salafi-jihadis rejected the inherent moral quality of moderation and were unsympathetic to institutionalized Salafis' attempts to appropriate it. This can be evidenced in the internal dynamics of Ansar al-Sharia. Even while AST's leadership moved away from calls to violence within Tunisia with their own version of the Tunisian specificity narrative, many grassroots Salafis still did not heed this

directive (Merone, 2017, pp. 74–75). Faced with continued Salafi grassroots contention, another strand of Jabhat al-Islah's rhetoric posited the existence of secular extremism to challenge the exceptionality of Islamist extremism.

Stoking fears of secular extremism

Just as Ennahda positioned itself within a new moderate centre, Jabhat al-Islah projected intolerance as an impending extremist danger to stability. Khouja encouraged other political actors to consider 'pluralism and political diversity as a positive factor' discouraging polarization (Ḥizb Jabhat al-'Iṣlāḥ al-Ṣafḥah al-Rasmiyyah, 2013c). Yet according to JI member Fouad bin Saleh, some political forces were not committed to 'the mechanism of democracy and the results of elections unless they are to their benefit' (Ḥizb Jabhat al-'Iṣlāḥ al-Ṣafḥah al-Rasmiyyah, 2014i). These actors were seen as targeting Islamists and thus violating the principles of democratic transfers of power. As one statement put it, 'some political actors in Tunisia do not believe in coexistence between different ideas and visions' (Ḥizb Jabhat al-'Iṣlāḥ al-Ṣafḥah al-Rasmiyyah, 2014b).

Extreme secularists were identified as dangerous through several tactics. Firstly, they were portrayed as agitating polarized sentiments by offending Muslims (e.g., Ḥizb Jabhat al-'Iṣlāḥ al-Ṣafḥah al-Rasmiyyah, 2012a). Jabhat al-Islah called for legal sanctions against 'attacking the Islamic faith and its sanctities' (Ḥizb Jabhat al-'Iṣlāḥ al-Ṣafḥah al-Rasmiyyah, 2013e). This reasoning implies that the state has a responsibility to defend Tunisia's genuine identity against such provocations, which is linked to its mandate of protecting societal stability. As tensions flared in a number of contentious incidents, state inaction was portrayed as an inadequate response (Ḥizb Jabhat al-'Iṣlāḥ al-Ṣafḥah al-Rasmiyyah, 2012a). Yet concerns over governmental passivity in the face of such perceived incitement soon gave way to outrage over the securitization of the religious revival that had flourished after the revolution (Ḥizb Jabhat al-'Iṣlāḥ al-Ṣafḥah al-Rasmiyyah, 2014h). Attempts to impede the Islamic current were associated with Western and elitist schools of thought (Ḥizb Jabhat al-'Iṣlāḥ al-Ṣafḥah al-Rasmiyyah, 2012c), thus implying a construction of the Tunisian people that drew a boundary excluding these foreign-coded anti-Islamist views.

Party members also attempted to combat the exceptionalisation of Islamist extremism. Khouja noted, for example, that there were extremists 'existing in all societies' and across various ideologies (Ḥizb Jabhat al-'Iṣlāḥ al-Ṣafḥah al-Rasmiyyah, 2013i). There was further talk of conspiracies and shadowy plots involving both internal and external forces to stir discord (Ḥizb Jabhat al-'Iṣlāḥ al-Ṣafḥah al-Rasmiyyah, 2013h). Khouja voiced speculation about whether some of the contentious acts allegedly committed by Salafis may have been actually carried out by impersonators (Ḥizb Jabhat al-

'Iṣlāḥ al-Ṣafḥah al-Rasmiyyah, 2013i). Through opening the possibility of conspiratorial scapegoating, this type of rhetoric introduced doubt surrounding the association of dangerous extremism with Islamism or Salafism. Moreover, the party called attention to alleged counter-revolutionary schemers fomenting economic crisis and unrest, such as strikes, with their ultimate goal to 'reproduce a dictatorship' (Ḥizb Jabhat al-'Iṣlāḥ al-Ṣafḥah al-Rasmiyyah, 2013j). Such rhetoric focused attention away from Salafism by redirecting concern towards a potential counter-revolutionary threat.

Moderation as pluralism and individual liberty

In response to the instatement of greater security measures against the Salafi current by the state, Jabhat al-Islah began to embrace a discourse calling for the protection of citizens' liberties against misguided attempts to counter extremism. Party officials stressed that Salafis were Tunisian citizens and deserved the same rights as did any other and pointed to the governmental obligation to 'protect all segments of society regardless of their affiliations', provided they had not committed destabilizing, corrupt or violent acts (Ḥizb Jabhat al-'Iṣlāḥ al-Ṣafḥah al-Rasmiyyah, 2014c). Similarly, security measures needed to be neutral; a speech of Khouja's emphasized the obligation for security forces to be apolitical and to operate in accordance with 'the limits of the law' (Ḥizb Jabhat al-'Iṣlāḥ al-Ṣafḥah al-Rasmiyyah, 2014g). At the same time, the party furthered the normative understanding of tunisianité as moderation in opposition to violent extremism through organizing events with slogans such as 'I am Tunisian . . . I am Against Terrorism' (Ḥizb Jabhat al-'Iṣlāḥ al-Ṣafḥah al-Rasmiyyah, 2014f).

The party also drew notice to the widespread nature of discrimination against the religious current. It called attention to women facing harassment for wearing the hijab, bringing to light the insults that outwardly pious women faced (e.g., Ḥizb Jabhat al-'Iṣlāḥ al-Ṣafḥah al-Rasmiyyah, 2013g). Protestations over foreign sheikhs being barred entry to the country also indicted double standards seemingly weighted against the Islamic current (Ḥizb Jabhat al-'Iṣlāḥ al-Ṣafḥah al-Rasmiyyah, 2013b). Mosques and religious education, too, were viewed by many Salafis as being unfairly scapegoated. Rather than focusing on real terrorists, such actions were seen by party officials as vilifying 'all manifestations of religiosity' (Ḥizb Jabhat al-'Iṣlāḥ al-Ṣafḥah al-Rasmiyyah, 2014d). Increased security measures on the revolutionary grassroots also received criticism, frequently using the rhetoric of human rights; for example, the party denounced arrest procedures that they viewed as evocative of pre-revolutionary practices (Ḥizb Jabhat al-'Iṣlāḥ al-Ṣafḥah al-Rasmiyyah, 2014e). In opposing such perceived government overreaches, the party contested the resurrection of increasingly exclusionary and securitized definitions of Tunisian identity and moderation.

Revisiting the state-moderation-security nexus

The securitization of the religio-political field in Tunisia has historically been linked to authoritarian legitimation through the discourse of moderation. The 2010–2011 revolution, however, invited a paradigm shift in how this concept was defined and embodied. For previously marginalized actors like Ennahda and Jabhat al-Islah, this involved the capacity to contribute to Tunisia's future trajectory and develop new understandings of the possibilities of moderation in relation to Tunisian identity. Could the concept of moderation be separated from the state's repressive role?

A comparison of Ennahda and Jabhat al-Islah's efforts to reformulate the concept of moderation between 2011–2016 illustrates that the political developments of both Islamists and Salafis did not occur in a vacuum. The ideological development of Ennahda and its emphasis on moderation as an increasingly inclusive centrism offered an opportunity gap for Salafis to maintain their ideological adamance to draw in Islamists discontented with Ennahda's concessions. At the same time, Ennahda identified itself with the Salafi current early on; given its history of experiencing repression and undergoing moderation, it seemed to expect a similar outcome for its Salafi counterparts. Jabhat al-Islah placed itself in an agentic role, arguing that it could help moderate the overzealous Salafi youth. Together, these strategies functioned complementarily to reimagine a more inclusive *tunisianité*.

However, both of these strategies were complicated by the fact that they could not significantly influence the trajectory of the Salafi-jihadi current. An upsurge in political violence led to Ennahda's growing tendency to distinguish itself from more radical Islamist movements. Ennahda could thus emphasize its commitment to the moderate consensus through discursively distancing itself from the 'extreme' polarity of the Islamist continuum. In contrast, Jabhat al-Islah members sought to emphasize the existence of secular extremism, and offered the possibility that conditions of unrest might have roots in a hidden conspiracy. This notion of concealed plotting bolstered the construct of normative Tunisian identity as moderate and allowed for a rejection of the imposition of state security on the Islamic current. Ultimately, this developed into a new formulation premised on the moderate nature of Tunisian identity that posited a state responsibility of neutrality within this centre ground.

Depending on the context, Islamists and Salafis fluctuated between seeing moderation as intrinsic to a politically free environment, in which extremism would naturally dissipate or be rejected, or vulnerable, in which an external antagonist was constructed. Islamists' attempts to position themselves within a moderate consensus, however, were not wholly successful in reassuring secularists, as the growth of highly anti-Islamist parties like the Parti Destourien Libre demonstrates. The 2021 coup by

Kais Saied – which has led to the persecution of Islamists, including Ennahda – casts further questions on the long-term impact of these strategies. Nevertheless, the trajectories of Ennahda and Jabhat al-Islah examined in this paper illustrate that the powerful motif of Tunisian moderation and its normative frontiers are continuously discursively remade and renegotiated by multiple actors.

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