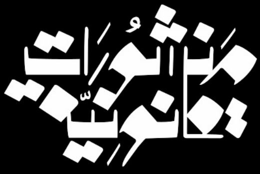

Going professional: The evolution of Islamic charities in post-authoritarian Tunisia

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1. Introduction

The fall of the Tunisian authoritarian regime in 2011 opened the door for religious actors excluded from the public sphere prior to the Revolution by greatly expanding the pool of material and symbolic resources available to them. Concurrent with the legalization of the Islamist party Ennahda[1], 'civil society' emerged as a new sphere of engagement thanks to Decree Law 88 of 2011, which facilitated administrative procedures for the creation of associations (see the appendix below for a comparison between the old and the new law). Indeed, coming out from secretive conditions thanks to the new socio-political opportunities, a great number of Islamic activists sized the opportunity to engage in a liberalized social sphere, founding different kind of religiously-oriented associations. Several among them decided to engaged in charitable activities, in the wake of socio-economic grievances triggered by the revolutionary momentum.

It is not a coincidence that after 2011 charitable activities have mostly become a prerogative of Islamic actors, and in particular of those associations created by former Ennahdha's activists. This can be attributed to two main factors: the specific dynamics of the Tunisian political context and the general ideological foundations of the Muslim Brotherhood. First, Tunisia represents a peculiar context if compared to other countries in the Arab world. Indeed, after having led the country to the independence in 1956 the president Habib Bourguiba undertook a campaign of modernization consisting on the repression of nationalization of (private) religious institutions, such as *awaqfs* (religious properties) and *zawiyas* (religious schools) and the obstacle to the creation of a *Zakat fund* (Dell'Aguzzo and Sigillò, 2017). In this way, until 2011 the majority of charitable activities in Tunisia where those undertaken by the (authoritarian) state. Thus,after the fall of Ben Ali's regime *Ennahdha* former activists' decision to engage charitable activities within the framework of associative work, has represented redemption of sorts for opponents of the old regime, who since 2011 have been free to provide alternative social services. Therefore, charitable activities flourished upon new political premises, as they are largely emerged as a socio-economic alternative proposed by former challengers of the authoritarian regime – Islamist activists - wishing to dismantle Ben Ali's family clientelist networks. Salafi associations created in Tunisia after 2011 also started to carry out charitable activities, however most of them disappeared after the fracture between *Ennahdha* and Salafist groups occurred in 2013, which banned the Salafi-jihadi group *Ansar al Aharia* as a terrorist organization (Sigillò, 2017).

Secondly, from a more general perspective, social and charitable activities have been an integral part of the Muslim Brotherhood's idea of society. In fact, the specific ideological apparatus of the political Movement is based in the idea that in an Islamic system, economic activity cannot be separated from moral values, as human life necessitates spiritual and material unity (Paciello, 2015). From this perspective, the origin of social and economic problems can be attributed to the materialism of western capitalist systems, which lead to the moral and cultural alienation of society. In proposing a spiritual and material reconstruction of society, the "Islamic way" arises as a social, economic and political alternative to Western systems, by attempting to offer a solution to social problems, poverty and unemployment (Ibid.). Therefore, "charitable associations" (*jam'iyat al-khayriyya*) - those associations where charity officially designated as the main purpose of their associative activity – were mostly created by former *Ennahdha* activists, a new phenomenon characteristic of post-authoritarian Tunisia. Associations with different religious backgrounds, such as for example the very few Salafi associations survived after the political crisis of 2013, have instead directed the bulk of their efforts toward preaching

1 Ennahda party took to the stage after several decades of repression. The Islamist party fully legalized only after 2011, was created in 1989 as the follow-up of the Movement of Islamic Tendency (MIT) *Harakat al-Ittijāh al-Islāmī* (1981-1989), known as the Tunisian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood.

and educational projects, which are carried out alongside limited charitable activities.

The proliferation of charities with religious backgrounds after 2011 has given rise to new research questions regarding their ideological framework and their evolution over the past years. In tracing a chronology of these associations, this paper aims to analyze the transformation of the charitable sector against a backdrop of political change, investigating how Islamic charities have emerged and positioned themselves in a renewed public sphere which has seen religious actors come to the fore after decades of repression.[2] Immediately after the fall of the authoritarian regime, religiously-oriented charitable associations positioned themselves as socio-political actors composing a new ecosystem with an 'Islamic' orientation. Over time, however, they have undergone a process of transformation deeply related to changes in the political landscape occurred after the crisis of 2013.. As the following pages will illustrate, this transformation was prompted by two intertwined factors: the evolving relationships with an Islamist party in transformation (Ennahdha) and the opening of new opportunities and constraints, notably the selective incentives that international donors and the Tunisian state accorded only to professionalized and depoliticized 'civil society actors' (Sigillò, 2018). This study highlights the evolution of the imagery and practices mobilized by religiously oriented charitable associations, while also showing the impact of these transformations on their mobilization capacity in post-authoritarian Tunisia.

2 All data presented in this paper have been entirely anonymized. A portion of the data used for this paper was obtained during field visits for author's PhD thesis between September 2015 and December 2017.

2. On the Islamic and Islamist nature of charitable associations

In the wake of 9/11 many non-academic commentators suggested that Islamic charities served direct political goals by recruiting radical militants or directly funding transnational jihadi groups. More recently, however, the topic of Islamic philanthropy has become a subject of academic debate, painting a much more complex picture. Indeed recent literature showed that rather than performing a direct political function by recruiting for political parties from among the poor and working-class communities, Islamic charities in the Arab world have instead strengthened horizontal ties within an Islamic middle class (Wickham, 2002; Wiktorowicz, 2003; Benthall and Bellion-Jourdan, 2003; Clark, 2004).

Delimiting the boundaries of "Islamic" when discussing the activities of social welfare associations is not an easy task, as they do not openly appeal to Islamic values through preaching (*da'wa*). Given that there is no formally acknowledged definition of "Islamic association," reference may be made to the formula adopted by Sarah Ben Nefissa – for an "association with Islamic background". She writes, "associations can be considered as Islamic insofar as the Islamic orientation clearly appears in the motivation and intentions of the action" (Ben Nefissa, 2004: 114). More specifically, Benoît Challand argues that charities with religious orientation "are those associations that include explicit religious principles in their work ethos" (Challand, 2008: 231). These charities' operations sit at the crossroads of various social welfare activities related to Islamic principles, such as offering winter shelter and help to orphans and elderly people, and organizing social and cultural events during Ramadan and the Eid al-Adha and Eid al-Fitr holidays. In some cases, charitable activity is also coupled with specific activities of *da'wa* and education or personal development (*tanmia bacharia*). Post 2011, references to Islam are also evident in the funding procedures of most charitable organizations: charities primarily fi-

nance their activities through the collection of zakat (locally collected alms), -which requires individuals to give a percentage of their personal wealth to the poor and is one of the five pillars of Islam and, as such, an obligation, and *sadaqats* (donations), a personal charity that is also encouraged by Islam but is not considered an obligation-. In some cases, Islamic charities have been funded by donors, sharing with them a common reference to Islamic norms and values- The most active in Tunisia have been Qatar Charity and two Kuwaiti organizations- Sheikh Abdullah al-Nouri Charity Society and the International Islamic Charity Organization.[3] Immediately after the fall of Ben Ali, donors provided a much needed boost to Islamic charities, whose efforts to attract international funding were hindered by their lack of experience, in comparison to better established associations founded before the revolution.

In the years since 2011, charitable activities with a religious orientation have emerged as a form of Islamic activism, as most of their founding members are ancient activists who were engaged in the MIT, the precursor of Ennahdha's party. Indeed, Islamic activism emerged against the backdrop of a society that, deprived of political opportunities during the authoritarian regime, developed rapidly in the liberalized political landscape after its collapse. As such, the research questions and hypotheses relating to Islamic charities in Tunisia stem from literature investigating the dynamics of transformation of *Islamist actors*, considered as activists carrying out the political project of transforming state and society according to Islamic values. Academic work on post-Islamism (Roy, 1992; Bayat, 1996) and moderation processes (Schwedler, 2007) overlap insofar as they both focus on the adaptation of *Islamist actors* to the new structural conditions being studied, i.e., regime change. However, these analyses remain focused on the doctrinal evolution and the internal (institutional) dynamics of Islamist parties, overlooking the ways in which this change relates also social actors, which are directly involved in the process of transformation and eventually affect its outcome. Thus, as shown in the following pages, the transformation of charitable activities is deeply intertwined with Ennahdha's party transformation, as they represent two spheres of engagement which were originally part of the same Movement (the Tunisian Movement of Islamic Tendency conflated into *Ennahdha* party in 1989), but that evolved separately after 2011 on the basis of extra-movement dynamics (external events and regional dynamics that played in Tunisia after the revolution) and intra-movement changes (progressive transformation of the Islamist party to a civil party).

In 2013, a political crisis unfolded in the summer months which, coupled with the ousting of a Muslim Brotherhood president in nearby Egypt, provided religiously oriented charities in Tunisia with the opportunity to normalize their status as "agents of civil society" by adopting logic of "engagement" with institutions. This logic can be seen in Ennahdha's decision to pursue a strategy of 'specialization' (*takhaṣus*), officially announced at the party's 10th congress in 2016, but already discussed at the 9th congress in 2012, which aimed to make the political party (*hizb*) a distinct entity from the broader movement (*haraka*), separating politics from religion. This leads to the progressive separation of competences between the political sphere (the field of action of political parties) and the religious sphere (the field of action of da'wa or religiously oriented charitable associations). Yet, the relationship between the party and the related associative field cannot be fully delineated as a part of an agreed strategy among Islamic activists gravitating around Ennahdha. Indeed, the issue of how to deal with da'wa (and religiously oriented activities in the social sphere) as opposed to political activities continued to be highly controversial. Moreover, the relationship between the association and the political party are far from being functionally set up. Associations are more

3 Since the campaign of securitization undertaken in 2014, charitable associations started to abstain from Gulf countries financial aid in order avoid of being accused of hiding illicit funding linked to militant activities.

and more entrapped in new logics which go beyond the engagement in a *Islamist* (revolutionary) movement. Indeed, they are caught in a series of tensions, which are due to having (or wishing) to work with the state or to seeking funds from Western actors. Notably, charities are exposed to new direct incentives, such as the delivery of subventions to selected associations, and indirect incentives, such as the absence of coercive measures targeting religious actors with suspected links to militant groups. However, as it will be shown in following pages the transformative changes do not seem to be at odds with charitable associations' perception of themselves as part of a "non-revolutionary Islamic movement" (Bayat, 1998). Instead of leading to a sudden revolution, "movements without revolutions" both coexist and compete with the dominant institutions and social arrangements. Thus, these types of movements do not ultimately challenge or undo the political authority (Sigillò, 2018).

3. Background on Tunisian charitable activities before 2011

Since the end of the seventies, Tunisia has followed a path of development centered on the market economy. The introduction of a stabilization program in 1983, led to a new era of social policy in which fiscal austerity constrained social spending. After the first budgetary cutbacks, which triggered bread riots in 1984, a new policy was introduced to limit the social impact of reductions in public expenditure. The state revitalized the social security system through horizontal transfers of social benefits — it opted for the establishment of a welfare system grounded in a (controlled) associative sphere. Notably, between 1987 and 2011 (Ben Ali's regime's timeframe), parastatal charitable associations, such as Tunisian Union of Social Solidarity (UTSS), ensured the distribution of state aid through its network of local relays controlled by the ruling party RCD (Democratic Constitutional Rally, the ruling quasi-unique party under Ben Ali) — Regional Social Solidarity Committees in each governorate and the Local Social Solidarity Committees in each district. The National Solidarity Fund, created in 1992, was another such parastatal social assistance mechanism. The fund was commonly known as "26.26", in reference to the presidential account number where citizens paid donations, and it operated on a territorial basis in the so-called shadow zones, which were considered the most marginalized in the country (Ben Romdhane, 2011).

In addition to parastatal associations, the state also allowed for the creation of like-minded associations. The founders of these associations generally came from the civil service and the RCD party. Their mandate focused on the social protection of women, children, the elderly and those with disabilities (Tainturier, 2017). These parastatal and state-condoned devices functioned as a tool for social control by including regime loyalists while excluding its critics, such those within the Movement of Islamic Tendency (MIT). Indeed, this "charity of state" was effective in exerting political and social control not only because political acquiescence was the main criteria for receiving assistance, but because local entrepreneurs were also obliged to contribute to the "aid machine" in exchange for business privileges (Hibou, 2006).

Within this context of clientelism and co-optation, the Islamist movement started to undertake charitable activities in secretive condition, labelled as "alternative activities to the charity of state".[4]. Indeed, religiously oriented charitable work initially emerged in opposition to Ben Ali's charity of state and was characterized by community-based and self-help activities. Notably, in the nineties, a period of strong anti-Islamic repression of Ben Ali's regime, Islamist activists organized a secret charitable network to provide support to those segments of the population belonging to the Movement. As one activist said, " Islamic charitable activities are not a specific by-product of the revolution, but they reemerged in

4 Interview with a former MIT activist, January 2016.

the post-revolutionary public space as a continuation of earlier social activities conducted in secretive conditions in support of prisoners' families and martyrs' widows and orphans."[5] Moreover, solidarity networks were often strengthened during periods of imprisonment, especially during the '90s, when a large number of Islamist activists were arrested: "the time spent in prison was very hard as I was far from my family. But, at the same time, it was an important experience as I reinforced friendships with my comrades in an extremely difficult environment. We established a sort of solidarity network which is still alive".[6] These interpersonal bonds and sense of a shared mission laid the groundwork for the expansion of the Islamic activism after 2011 — following the revolution, Islamic charities emerged as an informal social network formed by members of the MIT.

4. The rise of charitable associations after 2011: Emerging Islamic actors in a crescent polarized landscape

The toppling of the authoritarian regime in 2011 both created conditions in which actors previously excluded from social and political spaces — religious actors in particular — could flourish, and facilitated more open debate on Islam and Islamism throughout the country. Islamic political parties were legalized and religiously oriented associations emerged as key figures within an 'Islamic civil society' that had previously been forced underground, operating without national or international legitimation (Sigillò, 2018). From this perspective, post-revolutionary charitable activities have a clear political connotation, being largely undertaken by former opponents of the regime - Islamist activists - that after the fall of the authoritarian regime decided to redirect their efforts toward associative action as a form of Islamic activism: the construction of new religiously oriented social networks form the below,. As one former *Ennahdha* activist describes: "after the revolution, we could choose whether to keep playing a role in the party or turn to social action."[7] The undertaking of charitable activities in post-revolutionary Tunisia has functioned as redemption, of sorts, for *Ennahdha* activists and opponents of the former regime, who have tried to build an alternative, bottom-up welfare system far from the clientelist network of the Ben Ali's regime. In fact, on January 17, 2011, the day the composition of Tunisia's interim government was announced, prime minister Mohamed Ghannouchi also stated that associations whose actions were previously frozen by the regime would now be able to operate freely.. This allowed Islamic actors to fully engage with the associative field for the first time, in a public sphere that had previously been dominated by associations run by Ben Ali's family and its allies.[8]

Islamic charities rapidly spread throughout Tunisia, largely replacing former RCD networks. Propelled not only by revolutionary momentum, the boom of charitable associations doubled with the start of the Libyan crisis in March 2011. Thousands of refugees arrived in Tunisia and refugee camps were set up in the South. Humanitarian aid was organized and structured through the collection of essential products for refugees, caravans of solidarity and volunteering. Islamic charitable networks developed in response to the massive influx of refugees at the *Ras Jadir* border, providing humanitarian assistance before and after the arrival of international aid. In the context of widespread revolutionary enthusiasm, this initial mobilization of social welfare activities triggered the institutionalization of charities throughout the country.

5 Interview with the president of association N. and former MIT activist, November 2016.

6 Ibid.

7 Interview with former *Ennahdha* activist, May 2016

8 Interview with the general director responsible for the relations with associations at the Ministry in charge of relations with constitutional bodies, civil society and human rights, July 2018.

Therefore, in the post-2011 landscape characterized by socioeconomic grievances, religiously oriented charitable associations legitimized their work by directly responding to the state inability to meet the needs of the most marginalized sectors of the population. Unlike local secular associations such as Radio IFM, Rotary and Lions Clubs, emerging religious charities' missions were not rooted in social policies, but in religion. They positioned themselves in opposition to the so-called "Islam of state" and the old regime's social assistance, which was based on a mechanism of patronage: "We do not do it out of interest. We do not do it for the poor. For us, it is an obligation, it is our religion — we do it for God."[9] Moreover, these Islamic charities function as self-help communities, as they typically rely on established networks of kinship ties between old comrades. Therefore, they usually organize their work collaboratively. Activists working in bigger charitable associations usually help those in smaller charities by providing additional resources for their beneficiaries, for example. Moreover, Islamic charities usually organize common activities during the holy month of Ramadan, other religious festivities and major aid campaigns.

As they operated increasingly in the public sphere after the toppling of the regime, Islamic charities legitimated themselves by aligning with the public that had opposed the authoritarian regime for decades, while accusing the majority of secular associations — which had been largely tolerated before 2011 — of being close to RCD's old clientelist networks. The associations that had permission to exist or were tolerated prior to the revolutionary uprisings, however, say that they enjoy more freedom of intervention today, as they no longer have to respect the list of beneficiaries imposed by state officials: "during Ben Ali's regime, those associations trying to become autonomous went back to being regularly bound with the strings of the repression."[10] Islamic charities emerged in the post-revolutionary landscape as part of a social movement parallel to the Islamist party, a new socio-political bloc trying to counter the cultural, economic and political strength of the traditional camp linked to the Bourguibian or nationalist elite, which, even today, maintains some political and bureaucratic control after reemerged as the Nida Tounes Party, founded in 2012 with the initial scope to counteract Ennahdha.

As the majority of activists working with charitable associations initially came from a political movement, immediately after 2011the boundaries between social and political activism became blurred: "at the beginning, the association used to do everything. There was not a real distinction between political activity and social activity."[11] As such, the involvement of *Ennahdha* activists in the associative sector, and in charitable activities in particular, between 2011 and 2013 became an issue, with some accusing the party of indirectly re-creating a system of hegemony similar to that of the RCD under Ben Ali, by linking the machine using social aid to leverage political control. Moreover, as mentioned above, the increasing popularity of Islamic charities among the most disadvantaged segments of the population elicited a strong counterreaction from secular, leftist associations. This, in turn, lead to attempts to foster closer ties among Islamic associations, so they could form a cohesive bloc that could "defend against the attack" being carried out by secular actors[12]. The Tunisian Front of Islamic Associations (*Jabhah Tunisiyya al-Jamiʿiat al-Islamiyya*)[13] was one such attempt, created with the intent "to bring together Islamic forces to fight against secularism in Tunisia, the desecration of Islam and the insertion of shariʿa in the constitution".[14]

9 Interview with the president of the charitable association B., May 2016.

10 Interviews and informal talks with presidents of several micro-credit associations, May 2016.

11 Informal talk with the president of a charitable association, May 2016.

12 Interview with the president of the charitable association N., January 2017.

13 Formal network of Islamic associations (including charities).

14 Data retrieved from the web.

The Front, which included several Islamic charities and other religious associations (such as the Salafi *da'wa* associations), was particularly active during 2012, organizing demonstrations and protests in front of the constituent assembly (Merone, Sigillò &De Facci, 2018). On March 25, 2012, it organized demonstrations against World Theatre Day, and later that year it supported protests expressing discontent against the movie *Persepolis*[15] - considered as insulting Islamic values -, including a sit-in in front of the American embassy and a march from the Fath Mosque to the embassy building on September 14. Last but not least, the Front also signed a petition condemning a UGTT (the Tunisian General Labor Union), strike in December of that year, which was one in a series of escalating protests against the Islamist-led government that culminated in violent clashes in the capital.[16] Oppositional groups (mainly leftist and secular associations) denounced on Facebook those that supported the pro-Ennahdha petition, publishing the list of signatories, pointing particularly to a bloc composed of Islamic charities, *da'wa* associations, imams' associations and Salafi parties, such as *Jebhat al-Islah* (Merone, Sigillò&De Facci, 2018).

The "secularist" camp reacted strongly to the Islamic front's mobilizations through counteractions in an increasing contentious field. The opposition to the *Ennahdha* party peaked in the summer of 2013, culminating in a large-scale demonstration in front of the parliament demanding the resignation of the government. The protest came on the heels of the second political assassination in Tunisia[17] and the ouster of Muslim Brotherhood President Mohamed Morsi in Egypt. In January 2014, after the period of national dialogue that followed the institutional and political crisis, a technocratic government was installed under new prime minister Mehdi Jomaa. The new government launched a campaign to restore state control over mosques and bring under its purview the activities that protesters had claimed were being politically utilized by *Ennahdha* to "Wahhabize" Tunisian society (Sigillò, 2018). In this period, police carried out a number of operations targeting Islamic associations with the intent of verifying the legality of their activities. According to the majority of people interviewed, accounting procedures were used as the primary mechanism of pressure and control, with many associations accused of hiding illicit funding linked to militant activities. They faced sanctions that included a one- to three-month suspension, the freezing of the assets and even the definitive closure of the association (Sigillò, 2018).

According to the Responsible for the *General Direction for Political Parties and Associations (al'iidarat aleamat liljameiat wal'ahzab alsiyasia)*, a body affiliated with the Office of the Presidency since 2011, "the current law on associations is too ambiguous, thus leaving newly developed associations free to do what they want."[18] As such, since 2011, 449 associations have been sanctioned for failing to register the receipt of foreign funding, 179 because their statute was not clear or it breached Decree Law 88/2011, and 236 due to links with militant groups.[19] Charitable

15 The broadcast of the film Persepolis on October 7, 2011 on the Maghreb Nessma TV channel, has sparked protests from a Tunisian Islamic public who considered the film as blasphemous, as Allah is described, which would violate the sacred values of Islam

16 The strike was organized by the trade union against the so-called 'troika' government. Troika was the unofficial name for the alliance between the three parties (Ennahdha, Ettakatol, and CPR) that ruled in Tunisia after the 2011 Constituent Assembly election. Ali Laarayedh (Ennahdha) stepped down as prime minister on 9 January 2014.

17 The assassination of Chokri Belaid - an opposition leader with the left-secular Democratic Patriots' Movement - in February 2013 sparked first protests against Ennahdha's led government. In July 2013 a second opposition leader with the People's Movement party, Mohamed Brahmi, was assassinated. These two events triggered a sever political crisis which was solved with Ennahdha resignation, the institutionalization of a 'national dialogue' and the set-up of a technocratic government.

18 Interview with the Responsible for the *General Direction for Political Parties and Associations, July* 2018.

19 Data obtained by the Secretary of the Presidency of the Government, June 2018.

associations' reactions to these measures have been largely shaped by a context of political conflict, which was exacerbated after 2013, dividing the social fabric between "secularist" and "islamist" activists: "our association, as with many other charitable associations developed after the revolution, is close to Ennahdha. That is to say, we are not against the party as we share its values, but nor are we a part of the party. But just due to the fact we share the same values we are now persecuted."[20] Indeed, several associations, stress the fact that there was a clear shift in the mechanisms of the state control after 2013, which they see as clearly linked to the political campaign against Ennahdha: "the state's attack [on religious associations] was in an attempt to attack Ennahdha. I am wondering why the state did not exert control over secular charitable associations."[21] In some cases, interviewees articulated a firm stance against the state, claiming that "the state does not allow for the existence of charity in this country, because it would like to maintain its pre-revolutionary clientelist networks." [22]

While the *Ennahdha* party attempted to mediate between its support base and secular forces with one hand, it exploited the situation and pushed cadres active in the association toward change with the other. This juncture provided Ennahdha's leadership with a golden opportunity to compel its activists to accept the separation between daʿwa and politics on the basis of the call for 'specialization' that began in 2012 and culminated at the party's 10th congress in May 2016, with the official announcement of the "abandonment of Political Islam".[23]. Discussions about the separation between religion and politics- which have always had represented two intertwined components of the Islamist Movement -dominated the congress (Dell'Aguzzo and Sigillò, 2017). Thus, the policy of separation of competences and activities between the political party and the movement has in turn encouraged and facilitated a parallel 'specialization' of Islamic associations, such as religiously-oriented charities.

5. The transformation of Islamic charities within the frame of 'specialization'

The first institutional consequence of the strategy of 'specialization' was the attempt of separation of career between party cadres and executive directors of the associations – party leaders wishing to engage in more partisan issues left the boards of Islamic associations once elected to the *majlis choura* (the party's general council), while more da'wa-oriented activists resigned from choura to engage in the social sphere. Reflecting the *Ennahdha* party's inclination toward typical neoliberal politics, its associated charities in turn favored technocratic 'specialization', moving in the direction of professionalized NGOs, separating civic engagement from the political sphere. The past three years in particular have seen a transformation in the framing, structure, role and activities of Tunisian Islamic charities. As stated by a former MIT cadre and president of a popular a charitable association in Tunis, "we seek to specialize in the field of civil society where the party specializes in political affairs."[24] Charitable associations have progressively professionalized their activities under the mantle of 'specialization'. The procedures that beneficiaries have to follow for accessing assistance have become standardized: when an individual asks for help, they fill an identi-

20 Interview with the secretary general of the charitable association E., July 2018.

21 Interview with the president of the charitable association R., July 2018.

22 Interview with the president of the charitable association N., July 2018.

23 https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2016/05/19/rached-ghannouchi-il-n-y-a-plus-de-justification-a-l-islam-politique-en-tunisie_4921904_3210.html

24 Interview with the president of the charitable association *T.*, July 2017.

fication form, the organization conducts a field visit without notice, and there is always a possibility of being added to a waiting-list. These procedures are generally managed by social workers belonging to the association. As the author observed during field research, assistance may come in the form of food, household equipment and clothing. The goods to be distributed are stored at the association's headquarters and cataloged. In organizing their activities, charitable associations have established among themselves a careful division of labor to ensure that they are accountable to the most vulnerable segments of society and serve local needs in a consistent and logical way. In some cases, they have divided the urban space into zones of intervention, charging each association with serving a specific neighborhood. Using this geographical division, the associations use shared databases in order to avoid duplicate interventions.

The professionalization of charitable associations is also evident in the technical language adopted in order to compete with secular NGOs to attract Western international funding (Sigillò, 2018). While this transformation could be seen as a primarily an attempt to allay the suspicions of local leftist and secular associations about the financial relationship between Islamic charitable associations and Gulf donors,[25] this rebranding has also had a striking impact on how charities present themselves to the public. During interviews, representatives have refrained from employing the terms "Islamic" and "religious" in talking about their associations' core identity, referring to themselves simply as "good Muslims in a Muslim country" (Sigillò, 2018). Moreover, some associations have dropped references to their basis in Islam, presenting themselves instead as being motivated by a humanitarian mission, often pegging this to international standards as an instrument of legitimacy: "our charitable activities are not based in religious, but they are inspired by humanitarian standards established by international organizations, such as the United Nations."[26] The willingness of Islamic charities to distance themselves from religious referents is further evidenced by a recent spate of name changes, with many associations adopting more "neutral," non-religious or geographically inspired names.

In addition to the increasing professionalization, the majority of activists interviewed for this paper also affirmed their associations' willingness to broaden the scope of their activities beyond charity, leaving behind — at least nominally — their basis in Islamic norms and values.[27] Indeed, since 2014 several associations progressively engaged in new activities relating to social development (*tanmia ijtimaʿia*) and local governance. When asked about their reasons for doing so, interviewees explained that it was a rational choice intended to help associations "make a greater impact as professionalized NGOs."[28] Alongside their charitable work, several associations rolled out small social development projects for families and unemployed people, after-school activities and awareness campaigns on local development and environmental issues. This desire for a wider scope stems from the idea of eliminating dependency between charitable actors and their beneficiaries: "Charity is important, but it risks instilling dependency within beneficiaries. We need to specialize in social development if we want to contribute to social change while retaining Islamic val-

25 Initially, the majority of religious associations used to obtain financial support from Gulf-based charities, mainly from Qatari or Kuwaiti sources, which were attractive both because of their cultural affinities and because they do not apply the conditionality that Western donors usually do. However, the financial relationship between Tunisian religious charities and Gulf donors generated suspicion among Tunisian leftist-secular associations and their constituencies, triggering a campaign against the Islamic associations' financial opacity described above.

26 Interview with the president of the charitable association R., July 2018.

27 Several associations which in 2011 were officially labelled as 'charities', from 2015 started to present themselves as associations working on 'social development'.

28 Interview, with the president of the charitable association *R.*, June 2018.

ues."[29] The addition of 'local governance activities' was described by one interviewee as an attempt to start "serving all citizens instead of a small group of believers."[30]

Some associations have undergone a clear transformation in recent years, from religiously-oriented charities to development NGOs. In doing so, they have emphasized new "strategic axes" of professionalized action in their discourse in an attempt to acquire legitimacy at international level (with international donors) and national level (vis-à-vis the state). The most common activities of these rebranded charitable associations are: the promotion of a social solidarity economy (one of the main fields of intervention for international donors in Tunisia after 2011); the development of partnerships and networks among local associations, facilitating collaboration with the local administration and international institutions; attempts to develop the technical skills and institutional capacities of civil society actors, according to the principles of quality management.[31] The larger of the associations have established technical observatories tasked with the provision of legal services for associative activists and other, smaller associations that lack expertise and resources. This is strategically important given the state's legal injunctions against religiously oriented charitable associations since 2014.

This expansion of activities has led to job creation within charitable associations, with new, professional positions created, such as "consultant" and "project manager." This ties in with the increasing *managerialization* of these associations, necessitated by the conflict with the state. Particular attention has been paid to financial management: "We have hired an accounting expert in order to avoid problems with the state."[32] It is telling that during author's fieldwork, the heads of the associations showed the financial registers before the beginning of the interviews, pointing to deep-seated concerns about transparency and a desire to legitimize their managerial procedures. The professionalization of associations was not only a virtuous practice, but also a means of defense against "an attack from the state" (Sigillò, 2018).[33] As the president of an association said, "we must perfect our work to avoid being sanctioned for bureaucratic discrepancies. Now, all the accounts are all in order, with a complete list of the monetary transactions coming in from our national and international donors."[34]

However, as observed, the process of professionalization has not undermined underlying Islamic values. It is simply a professional restyle:

> *This transformation actually represents an evolution, which follows the program of elaboration of a 'modern Islam,' that is to say the notion of coming up with technical solutions for living any walk of life according to Islamic norms. It is about adapting the values of Islam to the contemporary context, as it is possible to live a modern life while respecting the distinction between the lawful and the illicit.*[35]

It seems the process of professionalization marks a necessary step for the survival of Islamic charitable associations at a difficult sociopolitical juncture characterized by a renewal of state repression: "We need to become professional in order to resist to the aggression of the state and to coordinate among

29 Interview with the vice-president of the charitable association *M.*, June 2016.

30 Interview with the president of the charitable association *K.*, May 2017.

31 Data obtained through interviews with charitable associations and analysis of first-hand material.

32 Interview with the president of the charitable association S., July 2018.

33 Informal talk with the president of a charitable association, May 2016.

34 Interview with the charitable association N., July 2018.

35 Interview with the president of charitable association *D.*, July 2018.

ourselves."[36] Thus, despite this transformation, it seems that charitable associations are struggling to keep safe their religious identity, even if these have civic rather than political bases, under the frame of 'specialization'. However, this transformation is not a clear-cut separation (*fasl*), but just a division of competences between different 'spheres' which originally where part of a comprehensive Islamic movement. Thus, the political oriented Tunisian Front of Islamic Associations, which was a heterogeneous network involving various associations with religious background, eventually expired, leaving space to renewed specialized and sectorial networks made up of professionalized associations: ex. regional networks of charitable associations. These networks are not spontaneous, but are instead coordinated by the larger of the urban professionalized associations which act as umbrella organizations: "we need to reinforce local partnerships in order to function. [We need] to create associative networks, to help small inexpert associations scattered across the country to professionalize and to cooperate with local and international institutions."[37] Recent years have seen new professional networks of charitable associations spring up in governorates across the country after the failure of Islamic political networks of the earlier post-revolutionary period.

6. The renewed relationship with the state: serving the city beyond the *Umma*

Yet another consequence of the state's crackdown on Islamic charitable associations since the installation of the technocratic government is a strategic shift in their relationship with local administrations. As observed during field visits, charitable associations appear to have engaged increasingly with regional administrations, while their "contention repertoire" is reserved for interactions with the central government in Tunis. The executive authority in Tunis, not always favorably disposed toward the *Ennahdha* party, is strategically referred to as "the state" by Islamic charities in order to equate its practices with those of Ben Ali's regime, namely his authoritarian state exerting control over local associations (Sigillò, 2018). Relationships between Islamic charities and local officials, on the other hand, are strengthened and legitimized on the basis of a shared sense of territorial belonging, rather than political competition. In fact, in the majority of cases, associations' executive committees include local notables who have personal contacts among regional officials, and who present themselves and are presented as resource mobilizers. These local ties are indispensable to association heads, who utilize them to create opportunities for collaboration and, in doing so, further entrench their legitimacy at a national level. However, it should be noted that after the fall of authoritarian regime, *Ennahdha* activists were permitted to join local institutions as compensation for past repression, so in some cases the collaboration can be said to be rooted in a common political affiliation.

Collaborations between associations and local administrations can come in the form of direct cooperation — the co-organization of charitable actions — or indirect cooperation, with authorities relying on the work of charitable activities to fill the void of public welfare provisions malfunction, especially in poorest regions of the country. Indeed, according to one regional official, "charitable associations can be a resource for the state as they are more enmeshed in the social fabric, and so they know better where the state has to intervene."[38] Therefore, charity started to be provided to a broader public beyond the "Islamic milieu". In other terms, charitable associations progressively "started to serve citizens

36 Interview with the president of charitable association R., May 2016.

37 Interview with the vice-president of charitable association O., June 2017.

38 Interview with the major of a district in the governorate of Sfax, October, 2018.

instead of just those people closer to the Movement, contrarily to their original activities”.[39]

Islamic associations don’t only function as subsidiary actors to local authorities. They also collaborate with municipalities to facilitate participatory budgeting, with significant numbers of Islamic charities taking part in awareness and fundraising campaigns toboost citizens’ democratic participation in managing the municipal budgets (Sigillò, 2018). These new partnerships mean that Islamic charities no longer need to present themselves as an alternative model for reorganizing society, one that stands in contrast to and challenges the state. Instead, they have become increasingly dependent on it and seek to work within existing institutions and structures, instead of altering them. In fact, there is scant motivation for Islamic charities to challenge the state, from which they receive official permits and financial aid.

These relationships have also fostered new dynamics between religiously-oriented charities and other (secular) associations. Perhaps the most prominent examples are the new forms of engagement that have arisen among charity organizations mobilizing around causes related to local governance, particularly those focused on environmental issues. Since the political crisis of 2013, this too appears to have emerged as a pattern across Tunisia, and is just one more strategy in the arsenal of Islamic charities attempting to shore up their legitimacy. In the Siliana governorate, charitable associations have integrated a local network to defend the development rights of the district and in particular to fight against a polluting enterprise. Also, in Sfax were the secular-Islamist divide is historically higher, several charities have invested in campaigns for the closure of the phosphate processing plant SIAPE. Last but not least, we can find evidence of the transformation of Islamic charities according to this new logic even in the most conservative regions of southern Tunisia, such as Médenine, where religion has historically influenced activities of social mobilization. Indeed, in 2016 charitable associations joined their secular counterparts in the mobilizations against pollutants firms in Médenine city.

39 Interview with a member of association M., May 2019.

7. Charities and the reconfiguration of a grassroots “non-revolutionary” movement

The transformative changes illustrated above do not seem to be at odds with charitable associations’ perception of themselves as part of a “non-revolutionary Islamic movement” (Bayat, 1998), which draws its origins from the MIT, then flowed into *Ennahdha* party, but that after the process of ‘specialization’ has progressively organized and coordinated its components within the social fabric. It is interesting to note that charitable associations can be found in areas where other Islamic associations exist, creating a sort of Islamic mutual aid service area in which different types of organizations with religious references are connected. The organization of charities’ urban logistics is one example of this inter-association connectivity. Indeed, it is no coincidence that a vast informal network of religiously oriented associations almost completely cover the new commercial neighborhoods of major cities, such as Sfax and Tunis. This informal network consists of professionalized charities, daʿwa associations, Imams’ associations and trade unions, associations of *Islamic economics*, *zakat association*s, where each association has its field of ‘specialization’. For instance, in Sfax the association of Islamic Economics functions as a think tank with the mission of broadening research on the applicability of Islamic values in the market economy (Haenni, 2002), while the ‘*Zakat Association*’ is invaluable within the local Islamic ecosystem as it can direct people wishing to pay *zakat* to charitable associations and, vice versa, provide charitable associations with contacts for fundraising.[40]

40 ‘Zakat association’ was created under the law no. 88 of 2011 as up to now the management of zakat has never been regulated at governmental level, as it has in other Arab countries. Indeed, the initial goal of the association was to act as an advocacy group vis-à-vis the National constituent assembly so to create a National Fund of Zakat.

In specializing, Islamic associations have become diversified and decentralized, which "lowers the risk of the movement being weakened by leftist and modernist forces".[41] However aside from transforming their frameworks and altering their activities somewhat, several of charitable associations are still somehow involved in mobilizations for the defense of Islamic values. While in official communications associations' founding fathers relinquished a distinctly Islamic identity and downplayed religious motivators, this was done in order to defend their association against the accusation of being "politicized"; however the separation from "politics" eventually does not jeopardize associations' founding fathers ideological stands, who can continue to mobilize in defense of Islamic values, as part of an informal (Islamic) network, beyond the 'specialization' in charitable activities. In August 2018, a significant portion of Tunisia's Islamic public, including charitable associations, took to the streets to protest against the report issued by the Individual Freedoms and Equality Committee (COLIBE), convened by a presidential initiative in August 2017 in order to propose a series of constitutional amendments relating to gender equality and human rights. The protesters marched, carrying a banner that read "Quran text before any other text," accused the committee of issuing a report with recommendations contrary to the teachings of Islam. This demonstration for the defense of Islamic norms and values closely resembled the protests organized by the Islamic front in 2012–13, involving a heterogeneous network of religious actors, such MB activists engaged in charitable associations, Salafi da'wa associations and a larger pious public: "this particular moment we are acting as Muslims who share the same objectives: the defense of Islam. So we mobilize together."[42] However, contrarily to previous mobilizations the anti-COLIBE protests are characterized by one key difference: they are formally labeled by associative activists as a "civil society action in support of Islamic values", thus respecting the rule of the *specialization*, according to which the political sphere (the field of action of political party) is supposed to be separated from the religious sphere (the field of action of civil society). The (Islamic) civil society is supposed to be in turn specialized in different (religiously oriented) spheres of action: da'wa, charity, etc. As a matter of fact, the technical organization of anti-COLIBE protests for the defense of the Quran have been a prerogative of the National Coordination for the Defense of the Qur'an, the Constitution and Equitable Development, a network of (specialized) da'wa associations; thus charitable associations participated in support and solidarity of protests, as part of an Islamic milieu, yet without being directly involved in the lead of these mobilizations, an activity which is anymore part of their competences.

In allowing for the reconfiguration of this informal grassroots network, one that may otherwise have been distanced from its support base by the 2013 sociopolitical crisis, 'specialization' has proved to be a necessity for the survival of Tunisia's Islamic ecosystem. It is important to note that, as the term implies, this ecosystem is not homogeneous, with criticism emerging from among the ranks of the older generation of activists involved in the associations . As a matter of fact, older activists (those who were engaged in the MIT since its birth at the end of the seventies) are the most disappointed with the Ennahdha's political strategy of compromise with secular forces adopted after 2014, which has led the party to neglect daʿwa. In light of this perceived failure, they see the associative sphere as the safeguarding Islamic values in opposition to a party whose political decisions threatened to alienate its social base:

> *The party now plays at professional politics, negotiating compromises with other parties. I prefer to concentrate on concrete things, such as developing the charity association. As*

41 Rhetoric on the cleavage between 'leftist-modernist and *Islamist actors*' is still part of strategic narrative in a context -the Tunisian associative system –characterized by a high polarization.

42 Informal talk with the president of a Salafi association closed by the government in 2015, July 2018.

an older activist, I get more satisfaction from this. The new generation of activists, on the other hand, is different. Young people love to play at politics, but they are completely detached from the values of Islam.[43]

Indeed, these activists consider their involvement in the association as the highest form of Islamic-oriented "political" engagement — distinct from procedural "politics" — "the activities of the associations are the true form Islamic activism. They have nothing to do with parties' dirty political games."[44] Thus, in the name of the defense of Islamic values some charitable associations, notably those led by older activists, have started to build informal relationships with da'wa associations belonging to different religious background (such as Salafi groups), as instance by co-organizing activities that involve their respective beneficiaries. However, it is important to address these nuanced relationships in the context of a host of other factors. While collaboration between associations with different religious backgrounds can be attributed to the increasing frustration with the *Ennahdha* party's turn away from Islamism, these social ties can also be ascribed to a shared sense of territorial belonging . This is particularly prevalent in regions characterized by a traditional Islamic milieu that extends beyond political affiliation: "we are all pious citizens. Whether we are close to *Ennahdha* or the Salafists, we work for the good of our city and our region."[45]

43 Interview with the president of charitable association *R*, May 2016.

44 Interview with the president of charitable association N., May 2016.

45 Interview with an *Ennahdha* activist engaged in a charitable association, October 2018.

8. Conclusions: current trends and future scenarios

The study of the evolution of Islamic charitable associations in Tunisia, offers both an empirical contribution and new theoretical perspectives on the pluralization of Islamic actors against a backdrop of sociopolitical change. Notably, over the years charitable associations underwent a process of transformation that was tethered to the changing dynamics within the *Ennahdha* party. The 'specialization' between the political and the associative spheres in particular prompted religiously-oriented charities to reshape their relationship with the state and politics — they established subsidiary relations with local administrations, as relays of public policies. Moreover, this evolution has had for a significant impact on Tunisia's Islamic networks more broadly, which have, in recent years, strengthened their ties through communal activities rather than political ideology.

As this analysis showed, the transformative changes do not seem to be at odds with charitable associations' perception of themselves as part of a "non-revolutionary Islamic movement". Indeed, Islamic charities adaptation to a neoliberal model of civil society can coexist with an implicit reference to Islamic values, albeit in a modified way. Moreover, the rebranding of the missions and activities of these associations has even presented an opportunity for the reconfiguration of a grassroots Islamic network: charitable associations continue to be part of a social milieu while simultaneously adapting to the new environment and its prevailing norms, which they justify with the logic of complementarity with other religious associations. As this paper shows, charities are players on two different fields, within and outside the informal Islamic network. While they mobilize alongside other religious actors (ex. daʿwa and imams' associations) to defend Islamic values, they have also progressively built up relationships with secular associations and institutions.

Thus, an investigation of whether this network is able to maintain a semblance of unity and sustainability — and subsequently its own specificity — in the longer term, given the ongoing process of transformation, would be highly relevant. Notably, the “non-revolutionary movement” of Islamic civil society actors drawn out from the observations outlined in this paper, embodies two tensions which eventually might draw two (opposite) scenarios . On the one hand, many of the older generation of activists in the charitable sector are feeling increasingly betrayed by the *Ennahdha* party’s “politics of compromise,” and so are cultivating distance from and challenging the party. They have come to see themselves as the gatekeepers of Islamic values and the true benchmark of Islamic activism, fighting against the threat of secularization. This sense of increasing frustration might lead in the long run to a radicalization of a ‘silent movement’. On the other, the process of ‘specialization’ has compelled Islamic charities to renegotiate their relationships with the state and other institutions. They are increasingly becoming bound to the logic and language of the associative sector, which unavoidably extends beyond the scope of political movements. Charitable organizations have, since the fall of Ben Ali’s regime, strengthened their relationships with public authorities, become more adept at attracting foreign funding and increasingly defined themselves according to their charitable activities rather than any political or religious affiliation, a process of professionalization that the new generations of activists – which did not experience the engagement in the Islamist Movement - will continue to propel. In this way, informal ties of a “non-revolutionary movement” may be destined to loosen and eventually break up, making the sense of unity, and eventually the idea of political movement itself, disappear.

9. Appendix

Table 1 : Provisions and changes of the law on associations before and after 2011

Law 59-154[46]	Law 2011-88
Declaration to the Ministry of the Interior (Governorate or Delegation)	Declaration to the General Secretariat of the Government.
The Ministry of the Interior reserves a period of 3 months to decide on the acceptance of the constitution of the association.	The Prime Ministry reserves 30 days to decide on the acceptance of the constitution of the association.
The law provides for 8 categories of associations and limits their scope of intervention.	No classification and limitation of the scope of associations is foreseen.
Associations of a general nature may not refuse any application for membership, failing which they may be sued legally.	The association sets the membership criteria.
There is no age limit for founders and members.	Founding members must be at least 16 years of age; other members must be at least 13 years of age.
Implicitly, Tunisian associations can only be constituted by Tunisians (the national identity card is required as part of the file).	Associations may be constituted by Tunisians or residents in Tunisia.

46 Law n. 59-154 7 November 1959, article 4, JORT, n° 63, 22 December 1959

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