Between Politics and Preaching: The Tunisian al-Nahda Movement in the City of Sousse, 1973–2014.

Rory McCarthy

St Antony's College, University of Oxford

Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of DPhil in Oriental Studies in the Faculty of Oriental Studies at the University of Oxford. Trinity Term 2016.

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Abstract

Research on Islamist movements in the Middle East and North Africa has tended to focus on leaders and ideologues to explain transformation over time. This thesis, however, is a political ethnography of the Tunisian al-Nahda movement that focuses on one city to present a fine-grained micro-study of the shifting trajectories of an Islamist organisation. The main original finding is that the relationship between politics and preaching in the practice of Islamism can be conflicting and irreconcilable, rather than cohesive and interdependent. By privileging the experiences of non-elite activists, this thesis also identifies informal networks, an individual reimagining of the Islamist project, and peripheral activism as explaining resilience under repression. It argues that al-Nahda has undergone strategic and intellectual adaptations, which have incurred costs, culminating in a decision in 2016 to separate the political party from social, religious, and cultural work.

This thesis is based on fourteen months of fieldwork among current and former al-Nahda activists in the city of Sousse. It addresses the origins of the movement in Sousse to ask why the movement first emerged in the city and what mechanisms of mobilisation were deployed. It rethinks the politicisation of the movement in the 1980s to challenge previous assumptions that suggested the movement grew away from its preaching origins. The thesis addresses the effect of two decades of repression, excavating the prison experience and the period of social exclusion which followed and which disaggregated the movement into its constituent parts. It explains why the movement fragmented after 2011 even as activists rebuilt and redefined their project. In conclusion, the thesis accounts for the tension between politics and preaching within the movement, interrogates the party-movement separation of 2016, and asks what lessons similar Islamist experiences in the region might offer al-Nahda.

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Note on Transliteration

When transliterating from Arabic, I use full diacritical marks following the guidelines of the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* (IJMES). Thus, ʿ denotes the letter *ʿayn* and ʾ denotes the *hamza* glottal stop. In line with IJMES, I do not use diacritics for personal names, place names, names of political parties and organisations, or titles of books and articles. So I refer to the movement as al-Nahda and its members as Nahdawis, rather than *al-nahḍa*, An-Nahda, Ennahda, Ennahdha, or Nahdaouis. I do, however, stray from IJMES style when writing personal and place names in order to use commonly accepted Tunisian spellings (often themselves derived from French transliteration conventions) so that those public figures and places I write about may be more easily recognisable. I use Rachid Ghannouchi rather than Rashid al-Ghannushi, and, for example, the district of Kalaa Kebira, rather than the more formal al-Qalʿa al-Kubra.

Abbreviations

AISPP	International Association for the Support of Political Prisoners
AKP	Justice and Development Party (of Turkey)
CPR	Congress for the Republic
FJP	Freedom and Justice Party (of Egypt)
GEAST	Group of Studies and Socialist Action in Tunisia
IAF	Islamic Action Front (of Jordan)
ISIE	Independent High Authority for the Elections
LTDH	Tunisian Human Rights League
MDS	Movement of Socialist Democrats
MOUPAD	Movement of Democratic Patriots; also known as WATAD
MPDC	Popular Democratic and Constitutional Movement (of Morocco)
MTI	Islamic Tendency Movement
MUR	Movement of Unity and Reform (of Morocco)
PCOT	Tunisian Workers' Communist Party
PDP	Progressive Democratic Party (previously the RSP)
PJD	Party of Justice and Development (of Morocco)
PSD	Destourian (Constitutional) Socialist Party
PSP	Social Party for Progress
PUP	Popular Unity Party
RCD	Democratic Constitutional Rally
RSP	Progressive Socialist Rally (later the PDP)
UDU	Unionist Democratic Union
UGET	General Union of Students of Tunisia
UGTE	Tunisian General Union of Students (associated with al-Nahda)
UGTT	Tunisian General Labour Union
WATAD	Movement of Democratic Patriots; also known as MOUPAD

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1 Introduction

In a crowded hotel ballroom in the resort of Hammamet, delegates from the Tunisian al-Nahda movement gathered for their long-awaited tenth congress in May 2016. It was a time not just for assessing how the movement had fared during the past five years of the democratic transition, but for determining a decisive new strategy for the future. After many hours of debate, the culmination of months of nationwide workshops and discussions, the delegates voted by large majority to transform al-Nahda into a political party that would for the first time formally separate itself from religious, social, and cultural activism. Rachid Ghannouchi, al-Nahda's charismatic 74-year-old co-founder and leader, presented this decision to the outside world in bold terms, telling *Le Monde*: 'We are leaving political Islam to enter into Muslim democracy. We are Muslim democrats who no longer call for political Islam' (Bobin 2016). At the conference, Ghannouchi took to the stage beneath a vast Tunisian flag to defend this reorientation before his supporters:

> The al-Nahda movement has not stopped evolving throughout its long journey . . . The functional specialisation (*al-takhaṣṣus al-waẓīfī*) between the political and other social fields is not a sudden decision or a submission to temporary pressures, but rather the culmination of an historical path in which the political work was distinct from the social, cultural and *daʿwa* work in our movement. (Ghannouchi 2016)

The 'functional specialisation' that separated al-Nahda into a party and a movement was not merely a structural decision about how best to allocate resources or how to be seen to comply with electoral regulations in the newly democratising Tunisia. Instead, it was the product of a long strategic and intellectual debate driven by growing disquiet among many Nahdawis about the identity of their movement after decades of repression and political exclusion. Thirty-five years earlier Ghannouchi and five of his colleagues had sat at a simple wooden table in a lawyer's office in Tunis for a press conference to propose a new political project based on a 'comprehensive conception of Islam' (*al-taṣawwur al-shumūlī*

li-l-islām), which combined the political and the religious in one vision (Harakat al-Ittijah al-Islami 2012a, 15). Yet here in 2016 was a rare public admission that it was no longer possible to fuse political and religious ambitions as one, and that what the movement called political work (*al-ʿamal al-siyāsī*) should now be distinct from what it called preaching work (*al-ʿamal al-daʿwī*). What had happened to that first comprehensive vision? Why was there such internal disagreement about the true character of al-Nahda? What did it mean to be an Islamist movement in a nascent democracy? Who spoke for the movement?

In all that is written about Islamists across the Arab world, fuelled by a security-led fascination with violent groups and the blossoming of jihadology as the new Kremlinology, movements like al-Nahda are often overlooked as merely peripheral. Yet this organisation offers an intriguing case study that explains why an Islamist movement transforms itself over time and how it seeks new ways to interact with authoritarian regimes and democratic political institutions. Here was a movement that began with ideas and a model borrowed from the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, but which soon branched out along a path so shaped by the specific Tunisian environment that the Nahdawis came to be regarded as a rather particular case, as Michel Camau and Vincent Geisser put it: '*islamistes pas comme les autres*' (2003, 267). Yet the announced departure from political Islam in 2016 was not just the latest stage in the trajectory of a uniquely Tunisian movement, but also reflected a debate under way within Islamist movements across the region who also sought to accommodate their projects to the changing political environment. Al-Nahda has played a central role in the modern history of a small nation that now stands out for its pioneering uprising against the regime of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in 2010-11 and, amid a region-wide descent into civil war and counter-revolution, for its rare transition towards democracy in the five years that followed. This transition is far

from the unalloyed success that many observers imagine, but it does at least suggest that Tunisia's political, social, and cultural forces deserve our sustained consideration and interrogation, and not merely when Western tourists die on Tunisian beaches.[1] Islamist movements across the region have closely followed the historical experiences of al-Nahda and the writings of Ghannouchi when deciding their own strategies and intellectual positions. It would serve us well as scholars to pay similarly close attention.

There are many ways to examine the transformation of al-Nahda. One remark in particular impels the approach I take in this thesis. Two decades ago, the French scholar François Burgat made a case for what he called 'involved empathy' (*empathie participante*) in the often-fraught study of Islamism, despite accusations of complicity with the subject that it might bring (1995, 12). For, as Burgat says:

> A reminder is unfortunately necessary: if there has been a methodological error, it has not been made by those who have taken the trouble to meet with Islamists before discussing Islamist issues, but by those who for so long thought that they could forego such an enterprise. (2003, 4)

This thesis relies on many hours of formal and informal meetings with current and former members of the al-Nahda movement from one Tunisian city. While sensitive to the difficulties of perspective such an approach entails, I draw on Burgat's reminder to present an immersive, fine-grained micro-study of the shifting trajectories of an Islamist movement.

This thesis asks as its primary research question why the political and religious components of al-Nahda's Islamist project, which were framed as intellectually interdependent, proved in practice to be so incompatible. It asks what were the elements of

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[1] On 26 June 2015, thirty-eight people, including thirty British tourists, were killed by a gunman on the beach of the Imperial Marhaba hotel at Port El Kantaoui, in northern Sousse, the worst single terrorist attack in Tunisia's modern history (Samti and Gall 2015). Such attacks on tourists, as well as the startling fact that some 6,000 young Tunisian men and women were estimated to have travelled to Syria to fight with extremist groups by late 2015 (Soufan Group 2015, 15), have driven much Western analysis of contemporary Tunisian politics.

the movement's efforts to mobilise support, what meanings the Nahdawis gave to their actions, and why these meanings changed over time. It considers the movement as a whole from its origins as a preaching circle, which in the mid-1970s became al-Jamaʿa al-Islamiyya (the Islamic Group), through the period of 1981-88 when it operated under the name Harakat al-Ittijah al-Islami (the Islamic Tendency Movement, MTI), and then its subsequent development as Harakat al-Nahda (the Movement of the Renaissance). The period under study begins in 1973, the date of one significant early meeting of the group, and reaches until late 2014, when al-Nahda, acting as a political party, lost a legislative election. This research operates in an explicit geography of the local and privileges the views and experiences of non-elite members of the movement so as to resist a common tendency to focus only on the most visible, formal politics of Islamist movements and their leaders.

1.1 Islamism and making meanings

This thesis studies the question of Islamism, by which I mean a project that seeks to be active in the political, social, and cultural spheres by drawing on the Islamic scriptural tradition and reinterpreting it for the present day. This encompasses a broad spectrum of different possible group formations operating in different contexts; I focus on one Sunni Islamist movement in Tunisia. I hope by such a definition to avoid the restrictive argument that Islamism is primarily a project to capture state power, or in Olivier Roy's words 'to re-create a true Islamic society, not simply by imposing *sharia*, but by establishing first an Islamic state through political action' (2004, 58). For where Islamists are indeed preoccupied with state power it is because the modern state seeks to transform and control all aspects of life. Islamists cannot ignore the state's pervasive reach:

> It's not only that the state intervenes directly in the social body for purposes of reform; it's that all social activity requires the consent of the law, and therefore of

> the nation-state. The way social spaces are defined, ordered, and regulated makes them all equally "political". (Asad 2003, 200)

Thus I draw on those understandings of the Islamist project that highlight its reach beyond the formal political sphere into social and cultural activism, which in turn becomes political. In other words, this is to say that 'Islamists are both conscious strategists and beneficiaries of deeper social change' (Ismail 2001, 34). My definition of Islamism draws on that adopted by Frédéric Volpi, who writes, with his own emphasis:

> An Islamist is one who believes that Islam as a body of faith has something *crucial* to say about how politics and society should be ordered in the contemporary *ummah* and who seeks to implement this idea in some fashion *as a matter of priority*. (2010, 14)

This definition incorporates those endeavours that do not target the formal political sphere. It also acknowledges that Islamists are in competition with many actors, including but not limited to the state, 'over both the interpretation of symbols and the control of the institutions, both formal and informal, that produce and sustain them' (Eickelman and Piscatori 2004, 5).

This research is situated within the ambit of social movement theory, which offered an understanding of mobilisation that started from a sense of the rationality of protest and which identified an array of explanatory concepts. By the mid-1990s theorists had determined three primary elements that explained social movement activism: political opportunities, meaning that shifting political constraints and opportunities shape movements; mobilising structures, meaning that individuals mobilise through formal and informal 'collective vehicles'; and framing processes, meaning that for collective action a group makes conscious strategic efforts to 'fashion shared understandings of the world and of themselves' (McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1996, 2-7). These elements have been applied extensively to Islamist movements in the Middle East and North Africa in a way that has served to reach beyond a narrative of Islamic activism that was once dominated by

the ‘logic of a sociopsychological approach’ (Wiktorowicz 2004, 6), an unsatisfactory perspective that was often deployed in explaining the origins of Tunisian Islamism.

However, social movement theory had a tendency to take a static structural snapshot. It drew heavily on studies of movements in open societies in the West, where groups might suffer less political control and enjoy better resources than in authoritarian systems. It did not explain why changes in political opportunity structures might prod different movements into different actions, why an economic crisis, for example, might lead some into Islamist activism and others towards leftist causes, or why such mobilisation might continue long past the moment of actual crisis. The structural approach paid insufficient attention to questions of strategic choice, cultural meanings and emotions (Goodwin and Jasper 1999). Also absent was the explanatory role of religion, which could be a potentially ‘disruptive’ force offering legitimation for protest, moral imperatives, motivating symbolism, self-disciplined commitment, and room for strategic flexibility (Smith 1996). New iterations of this theoretical approach seek to remedy this structuralism by identifying other important concepts, including networks of people, communication between individuals, and the negotiation of identities (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001, 22). This thesis draws also on those who give a priority to detailing the process of making meanings within movements. Here I use Charles Kurzman’s definition of an effort to impose meaning on the world as a goal, a spur to action, and a site of contestation (2008, 5). Social movements are key sites of meaning making in his reading:

> Their activities foreground resistance to the dominant norms and institutions of society. They raise questions about the possibility of alternative world-views and alternative dispensations, and in so doing they challenge participants and observers to re-think meanings that are too often taken for granted. (Kurzman 2008, 6)

This ought to be particularly the case for Islamist movements, whose mobilisation, as this thesis demonstrates, stretches into social and cultural spheres. Kurzman proposes that

meaning-making be privileged as 'constitutive of all variables and mechanisms', in other words to acknowledge the centrality of the proposition that people's understandings of their world shape the way they act and react (2008, 10).

What meanings might be most relevant in the study of Islamists? Most obvious is the initial Islamist argument that intellectually Islam possesses a unique universalism, which acts as a guide for all aspects of life, the social, cultural, economic, and political. This idea is reflected in the scholarly proposition that contemporary Islam plays a more potent role in politics than other religions. Most notably Michael Cook argues that Islam, in comparison with Hinduism and Christianity, offers a distinctive resource for politics because of the way identity, social values, and fundamentalism blend together in the present (2014). Religious traditions change only slowly, Cook argues, and collective identities are not in constant flux but instead rather robust. This thesis, however, dissects the praxis of an Islamist project to argue instead that changing political and social contexts and the interpretations and choices of individuals are much more significant in shaping activism than historic religious traditions.

Islamists also present new meanings for activism. In her study of Islamic activism in Egypt, Carrie Wickham identifies a deliberate process of mobilisation driven by Islamic counter-elites around 'a new ethic of civic obligation that mandated participation in the public sphere' (2002, 120). This ethic was sufficiently powerful to overcome fear of the potential costs, in terms of time, energy, resources, and risks, of being active in an authoritarian system. Activism was presented as a religious obligation and was particularly resonant in peripheral urban areas on the outskirts of Cairo that lacked institutions of communal self-help. It succeeded because it was framed through a respected cultural repertoire as a form of *da'wa*, the call to Islam (Wickham 2002, 157). This has likewise been presented as 'ideology through activism', encouraging Islamists, for example, to

work or volunteer in Islamic social institutions, such as medical clinics (Clark 2004, 14). In contrast, the impact of ideas and their reproduction within a movement has also been identified as highly detrimental in some situations. Thus, Hazem Kandil argues more recently of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood that it had constructed an ideology that attributed worldly success to religious devotion, which it supported through an unorthodox interpretation of Islamic revelation and history (2015, 175). Its 'religious determinism', in Kandil's view, discouraged adherents from developing concrete solutions to real-life problems, which weakened the Brotherhood's hand in the power struggle that led to the coup of 2013.

The question of *daʿwa* here is significant. Literally it means the 'call' to Islam and is usually considered to mean preaching or proselytising. What Islamist movements propose, however, is to give an activist conception to *daʿwa* with the goal of an Islamic reform of society beginning with reform of the individual and spreading through a network of relations in the community. This might involve study circles, styles of dress, consumption of religious literature, pilgrimages, choreography of weddings, informal financial support, or taking part in other sets of rituals or discrete practices. As Talal Asad argues, individuals of every community imagine it to have a particular character and that what is imagined then 'predicates distinctive modes of being and acting' (2003, 197). Through the daily lived practice of belonging within these movements so groups of individuals create their own subculture. This is what Asef Bayat calls an 'imagined solidarity', which is 'forged spontaneously among different actors who come to a consensus by imagining, subjectively constructing, common interests and shared values between themselves' (2005, 904). By striving to create for themselves their imagined ideal society, so they create a new form of social action. However, this *daʿwa* activism is not merely an apolitical attention to superficialities of style and dress. Rather, it challenges the

state's regulation of quotidian practices which shape the public sphere (Mahmood 2005, 73-4). As Ismail argues:

> The pursuit of morality as a modality of insertion into the public sphere embodies power practices, in particular dictating the norm. Islamist interventions raise questions about the basis of the frames of references of public morality, the boundaries of the private and public, and, ultimately, about who controls the public sphere. (2006b, 168)

Thus morality-based activism in the social sphere becomes a form of symbolic contest.

Informal, or 'interpersonal', networks play a powerful role in producing these meanings and in shaping mobilisation (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001, 22). These networks revolve around the creation of shared values and collective identity, rather than formal organisational hierarchies. In lower income communities in Cairo, Diane Singerman identifies the role of informal networks built around family ties, informal employment, and informal savings associations in forging political activity which tended to remain 'subterranean' in the face of an authoritarian regime (1995, 8). Similarly, with Islamist movements she identifies their innovative use of informal, personal networks and religious and cultural associability to nurture a collective identity (Singerman 2004, 151). Others also describe these micro-practices of mobilisation which occur particularly in urban spaces, where Islamists may make themselves arbiters within their own communities, or welfare providers, or where they may try to oversee public morality, investing all these activities with Islamic symbolism (Ismail 2006b, 170). In Istanbul, Jenny White finds similar informal Islamist networks using 'vernacular politics', in which people are bound together less by ideology or formal organisation than by connections based on local culture, personal relations, and community networks which act together as a set of norms of mutual obligation (2002, 6). More broadly, this vocabulary of the subterranean, the micro-practice, and the vernacular resonates with James Scott's concept of the relationship between the public and the hidden transcript as a diagnosis of power relations (1990). In his reading, much of the political struggle of subordinate groups is not

conducted in public, where the open discourse is controlled and circumscribed by the dominant power, but in more ambiguous territory. Scott argues that excavating a hidden transcript of insubordination, 'the infrapolitics of the powerless', may reveal 'a critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant' (1990, xii-xiii).

None of this mobilisation, meaning making, or reliance on informal networks happens in a static context. A recurrent theme throughout this thesis is the nature of the adaptation within the al-Nahda movement and its precursors. Adaptation was a constant adjustment to the changing political, social, and economic context, but it was also reciprocal: the changing context and discourse in turn shaped the movement. This adaptation was often uneven, ambiguous, and improvised. Significant transformations have shaped most Islamist movements across the region. Some, like al-Nahda, have become political parties that accept the rules of a civil, democratic, pluralist system and no longer advocate for the imposition of shariʿa law. Increasingly, they face competition from an array of other social and political Islamic projects. There are two broad explanations for this transformation. The first is to consider this shift as marking a new phenomenon of 'post-Islamism'. The source of this transformation, as Roy puts it, was that Islamism had failed to capture the state and had exhausted its revolutionary zeal (1994). Instead, Islamist movements split into 'neofundamentalism', or morality-focused activism in the private domain, and nationalist political parties advocating elections, coalitions, and democracy, and for whom the political took precedence over the religious (Roy 2004). Islamists had been secularised by the process of politicisation: 'Political logic won over the religious, instead of promoting it' (Roy 2004, 61). A similar reading presents this evolution as less a historical development and more a conceptual rethinking. Bayat characterises post-Islamism as 'both a condition and a project': condition, in that this exhaustion forced a reinvention of Islamism, and project, in that there was a conscious effort to conceptualise a

way to transcend the Islamism of the past towards a new discourse of ambiguity, inclusion, and compromise. 'Whereas Islamism is defined by the fusion of religion and responsibility, post-Islamism emphasises religiosity and rights', Bayat writes (2007, 11).

A second approach has been to consider this transformation as the result of integration in the political process. This is presented as an inclusion-moderation hypothesis, which proposes that an Islamist party faced with the shifting contexts of electoral politics can change and expand the boundaries of its own ideology. As Jillian Schwedler writes:

> Through practice—as political actors set agendas, engage narratives, interact with others, and seek to take advantage of new political opportunities—they construct boundaries of acceptable practices, conceptual frames within which they act to realize their objectives. (2006, 150)

This redrawing of boundaries is not inevitable but is most successful, in Schwedler's analysis, with parties that allow for internal debate and discussion over their ideological discourse, as she finds in her comparison of Jordan's Islamic Action Front (Jabhat al-ʿAmal al-Islami, IAF) to Yemen's Islah party (al-Tajammuʿ al-Yamani li-l-Islah). Schwedler demonstrates that the redrawing of boundaries tends to produce ideological 'moderation' and so tends to mobilise support among growing constituencies. Of course, as Schwedler herself acknowledges, the concept of moderation holds little analytic value as a wholesale category (2006, 10). Individuals may be moderate in some positions and radical in others; moderation is anyway a more comparative than substantive term. It may obscure competing internal dynamics within movements, or differing political contexts, or the fact that ideological change tends to produce contradictory outcomes. Thus, as Wickham argues, it may yield 'agendas in which newly embraced themes of freedom and democracy coexist uneasily with illiberal religious concepts carried over from the past' (2002, 2). Nonetheless, considerations of short-term political advantage, particularly to preserve inclusion in the political process, have encouraged pragmatic self-restraint,

postponing calls for the application of the shariʿa, for example. Wickham also suggests that changes in the behaviour of political actors may go on to change their beliefs, and so this shift becomes more than mere strategic adaptation. Such changes in belief are also affected by increased interaction with other civil and political groups and by exposure to more progressive readings of Islam combining to create a process of value change within individuals.

Paying detailed attention to meanings, the imagining of solidarities, the shape of informal networks, and the process of intellectual adaptation reveals much about the internal dynamics and trajectories of Islamist movements. The Tunisian Islamist experience was largely excluded from this debate in the years before 2011, yet it offers a rich empirical source of evidence that is still to be explored in detail.

1.2 Writing Tunisian Islamism

Until 2011 it was difficult and dangerous to both researcher and informant to conduct fieldwork on Islamism in the authoritarian police state that was Tunisia, which may explain the relative dearth of recent detailed studies of al-Nahda. In the historic scholarship on the movement, much of it conducted in the 1980s, two broad trends are apparent. The first has been to regard al-Nahda and its predecessors as presenting a reassertion of cultural identity against the West and the post-colonial experience. This is clearest in Burgat's emphasis on the quest for cultural authenticity, a protest that he describes as the successor to Arab nationalism and a form of 'reconnecting with the "pre-colonial" symbolic universe' (1993, 309). Others offer a similar cultural reading, in which the Islamists are seen as an 'expression of an entire counterproject for society' (Zartman 1991b, 4) or, as their own literature suggests, an assertion of an Arab-Islamic identity in direct challenge to a Western-inspired, state-imposed secularism (Tamimi 2001). The Islamists are seen as developing a particularly Tunisian character to their thinking, emphasising local concerns,

playing to a historical continuity seen as threatened by the regime and, in particular, presenting themselves as the rightful heirs to the symbolic tradition of the Zaytuna mosque-university, the historic centre of Islamic teaching in Tunis (Burgat 1993; Mabrouk 2012).

A second approach has identified structural explanations, pitting support for the Islamists as a reaction to the failure of modernisation by secular Arab elites in the first decades of independence. Thus Susan Waltz argues that psycho-social explanations best account for the resonance of Islamist ideas because young Tunisians are seen as having longed for an ideology to reaffirm their economic and cultural self-worth, a 'quest for positive self-identity' (1986, 665). Others echo this approach, arguing that the movement represented a new community, a social periphery trying to resist depersonalisation and marginalisation (Zghal 1991), or that it embodied 'the political voice of the disappointed urban poor, for whom national sovereignty and the discourse of modernisation failed to deliver the promised goods' (Charrad 1997, 305).

Elements of both these explanations seem convincing, but there are nevertheless a number of difficulties remaining. The chronological view of Islamism as a reimagined Arab nationalism overlooks the evidence of long-running Islamisation projects, most notably in Egypt, predating the 1950s and 1960s when Arabism was at its height. Structural economic explanations struggle to account for the particularity of Islamist claims, the rationales of the Islamists making those claims, or the persistence of Islamist movements beyond moments of economic crisis into periods of growth. Nor do they account for the heterogeneity and changing character of these movements. If Islamist motivation is seen through the lens of a re-assertion of cultural identity or a psycho-social reaction to economic crisis, how do we explain the internal divisions and transformations within specific movements? Why did Islamists do better at harnessing these grievances

than trade unionists, leftists, or other political rivals? If socio-economic grievances are key how do we explain the fact that Islamist movements, including al-Nahda, are not simply psycho-social coping mechanisms but often espouse political goals (Wiktorowicz 2004, 9)? If socio-economic grievances are so important why do Islamists recruit not just from the poorest sectors of society, but often from the educated, professional middle class too (Wickham 2002; Clark 2004)? How do these explanations account for the very different paths taken, for example, by Algerian, Egyptian, and Tunisian Islamists? Do these approaches not exclude the possibility of Islamists offering a new meaning system that emphasises faith and morals (Tuğal 2002, 95)?

More persuasive accounts of the Tunisian case tend to emphasise the political context within which the Islamists operated and the effect this had on their ideology and organisation. Thus the Islamists in the 1980s are seen as entering a political field in which secular, liberal, leftist, feminist, and trade unionist opposition had already established key demands on human rights, women's rights and democratic representation (Dalacoura 2003). This shaped and constrained the emerging Islamist ideology such that it too drew from Tunisia's reformist tradition (Hermassi 1991) and its particular political context (Camau and Geisser 2003, 267-313). This is not quite Schwedler's inclusion-moderation hypothesis, given that al-Nahda and its forerunners were entirely excluded from the political process until 2011, apart from a brief and fateful electoral experience in 1989. Nonetheless, there was a series of negotiations between the movement and the regime in the 1980s such that their relationship shifted between confrontation and a degree of participation (Allani 2009). Yet, perhaps we should be asking in this case not about the effect of inclusion, but rather how *exclusion* in the repression of the 1990s and 2000s provoked ideational change and 'made it possible and necessary for Ennahda to entirely re-elaborate how political Islam could contribute to the developmental trajectory of the

country' (Cavatorta and Merone 2013, 859). Such intellectual adaptation is often presented as a product of Ghannouchi's own thinking and writing during his years in exile, as if he alone embodied the movement (Tamimi 2001). Yet little work has considered other viewpoints within al-Nahda or explored what happened to the movement during these two decades inside Tunisia, when its members were in jail or were suffering social exclusion in their communities. This thesis shows that even though the movement formally ceased to exist, its members were still able to meet, both in prison and, more discreetly, after they were freed. I offer new evidence of significant efforts by the 2000s to re-establish the movement and to reimagine the Islamist project.

Since the uprising, research on al-Nahda has centred on the leadership's strategic choices during a period of democratisation. Again, the focus here has been on reviving the debate on the compatibility of Islamism and democracy and on how al-Nahda's experience of government in 2011-14 and again from 2015 affected its strategy and its intellectual vision. Once more, the evidence for this draws heavily on elite-level interviews that summarise the views and writings of the movement's central political leadership. Al-Nahda's victory in the first elections of October 2011 is ascribed either to its voter outreach, careful grassroots campaigning, and an 'intentionally vague religious message' (Churchill 2011), or alternatively, in a reading that suggests al-Nahda's organisational skills were overstated, to the long-term social change of 'the unexpected return to religiosity' in Tunisian society in the previous decade (Haugbølle and Cavatorta 2012a, 21). In assessing the experience of al-Nahda in a coalition government, most scholarship broadly revisits the question of changes in political behaviour in the new context of open, pluralist political competition in the post-2011 environment. Much attention is paid to elite-level political negotiations and bargaining between Islamist leaders and their more secular rivals. Some scholars identify the importance of mutual ideological tolerance as

explaining the success of the initial transition (Stepan 2012). Others emphasise al-Nahda's compromises and coalitions during the constitution-drafting process (Pickard 2015, 30), or its 'bargained competition' with the elites of the former regime (Boubekeur 2015). In a sociological approach this was portrayed as a reconciliation between the nationalist middle class of the administrative and security elite and the Islamic conservative middle class, as represented by al-Nahda (Merone 2015, 5). There is a widely-held view that al-Nahda was forced to operate within certain boundaries, not least the challenge of coalition government with two more secular partners, which would push the Islamists to become 'reluctant agents of democratisation' (Roy 2012, 8). Such constraints forced the movement to search for political consensus with its rivals and encouraged a form of political behaviour, which for some is a clear validation of the inclusion-moderation hypothesis (Guazzone 2013, 47). From this behavioural change there also followed an intellectual shift, 'a complex process of ideological revision and soul-searching', in which Nahdawis rethought what their movement stood for in this new environment, however hard that was to elaborate in detail (Cavatorta and Merone 2015, 33). Others take a more wary view of al-Nahda to argue that what mattered in this period was not the movement's internal debates, its interaction with other parties, or other political learning, but rather 'political calculation geared toward gaining and keeping power' (Netterstrøm 2015, 120). A perceptive minority note the emergence of a 'rotten compromise' between al-Nahda and former regime elites, which limited the development of robust political pluralism and stifled political channels for mounting social grievances (Marzouki 2015).

Such a tight focus on the elite-level politics of al-Nahda is perhaps inevitable given the remarkable political opportunities that emerged in the new Tunisia. However, as with previous work on democratisation, there is still a tendency to place much emphasis on the role of the state, ruling elites, and the leadership of major political parties (Pace and

Cavatorta 2012, 127). This should be surprising given the fact that the predictions of democratisation theories have not always materialised. After all, the main opposition parties and civil society organisations did not lead the great political change of 2011, as we might have expected, but in fact played only a minor and often reluctant role in the uprising. A focus on the political behaviour of the leadership still tends to reinforce an historical view of al-Nahda, and one perpetuated by some of the leaders themselves, as a unified movement pursuing primarily a political project aimed at state power. It does not ask how this came to be the priority, whether that path to politicisation was seamless, and, indeed, whether ordinary members of the movement perceive it in the same way as their leaders. Obscuring such internal dynamics misses much about the complex trajectory of this Islamist movement, how it built informal networks and why it survived two decades of severe repression. The transmission of ideas from the leadership to the grassroots of the movement and the contest and negotiation over these ideas is too easily overlooked.

1.3 Locating Sousse

The tendency in studies of Islamism to focus on the perspectives of senior leaders tends to create the impression that movements are monolithic, that leaders represent all members, and that their words do not have multiple meanings. We pay much attention to interviewing leaders, reading their statements, and listening to their public performances, but we spend much less time considering how such words are received and understood by their own supporters and how these perceptions vary over time. How do small groups of Islamists create meanings and use them to craft collective identities and to build communities for collective action? Who then speaks for these movements: the leaders or the base? How do these views change over time?

Even though Islamist movements are more fragmented than they appear, most accounts tend to gravitate to and are limited by a static reading of the ‘language of the

ideologues' (Bayat 2005, 895). This seems to be particularly the case with al-Nahda because of the prominent and enduring role of Ghannouchi as founder-leader and intellectual reference. To challenge this is not to argue that the informal activities of ordinary men and women are more important or influential than those of movement leaders, but rather to offer a corrective to the 'systematic overlooking of the role of nonelite actors' that others have already noted (Schwedler 2006, 5). A focus on top-down politics, which looks at Islamist rhetoric, publications, and organisational activities from above, tends to miss the solidarities that emerge from informal, value-centred, grassroots politics (White 2002, 25-6). Singerman argues that the activities of popular classes, for example in her case in Cairo, have an often under-studied political impact and collective benefit and that popular political activity is always taking place, not just at peak moments of political crisis or protest. This is particularly the case in authoritarian systems, where:

> People learn to express their political beliefs in subtle and creative ways. Often the structure and discourse of this political arena has gone underground, or is too subtle or symbolic to capture the notice of scholars or politicians who are more interested in the powerful and schooled in the political dynamics and traditions of their own societies. (Singerman 1995, 5)

The challenge in explaining the transformation of Islamist movements is to capture these unnoticed collective actions and to map how they change over time.

This thesis is a deep study located in the city of Sousse, a fieldwork site chosen as a way to reach beyond the limits of a capital city. It seeks to capture dynamic and multiple accounts from below of how and why one community of adherents emerged, formed networks, created collective identities and solidarities, survived two decades of repression, and then reassessed their sense of belonging to the movement in the new post-2011 political context. This is not to claim that the case of al-Nahda in Sousse is any more representative of the movement's experiences across the entire country than research focused solely on leaders and ideologues in Tunis. However, it is to privilege the voices,

experiences, and shifting interpretations of a network of non-elite actors in one regional city as they joined and became active in (and sometimes left) the movement over a period of four decades. Local level studies of Islamist, pietist, or Salafist activism in the Middle East and North Africa have tended disproportionately to favour Cairo as a site of research (for example: Wickham 2002; Mahmood 2005; Hirschkind 2006; Ismail 2006a; Gauvain 2013; Kandil 2015). Similar approaches in other cities in the region exist, but are significantly less common: Istanbul (White 2002), Beirut (Deeb 2008), Gaza (Roy 2011), and Casablanca/Rabat (Spiegel 2015). In Tunisia, local studies have been particularly rare. Clement Henry Moore examined how the monopoly of the Neo-Destour Party affected the politics of one village in the years after independence in a study of Hammam Sousse, whose urban sprawl now attaches it directly to the larger conurbation of Sousse itself (1963). Two scholars several years apart studied the village of Tebourba, in the rural northwest, to explore rural development and cooperatives (Zussman 1992) and later to demonstrate that structural adjustment reforms reconfigured authoritarianism rather than promoting political liberalisation (King 2003). A small number of journalists and scholars paid detailed attention to the southern phosphate-producing city of Gafsa, which in 2008 was the scene of a long but largely unnoticed protest movement that presaged the later uprising (Amroussia 2009; Chouikha and Geisser 2010; Allal 2010). Yet research on Tunisia has so far lacked a detailed, local study of Islamist activism, not least because of the difficulties and dangers to researcher and informants alike of undertaking such an enterprise at any point in the 1990s and 2000s. The French scholar Béatrice Hibou, who visited Tunisia during these years to research the political economy of domination, described how her interviewees were often harassed and how she too was systematically followed and intimidated by ‘police men in civvies, straight out of bad cop films, with leather jackets, dark glasses and faces like gangsters’ (2011, 18). After January 2011 such

intimidation, at least as far as foreign researchers were concerned, became no more than a bad memory. The uprising threw open the door to scholars and presented a wealth of new opportunities for immersive study.

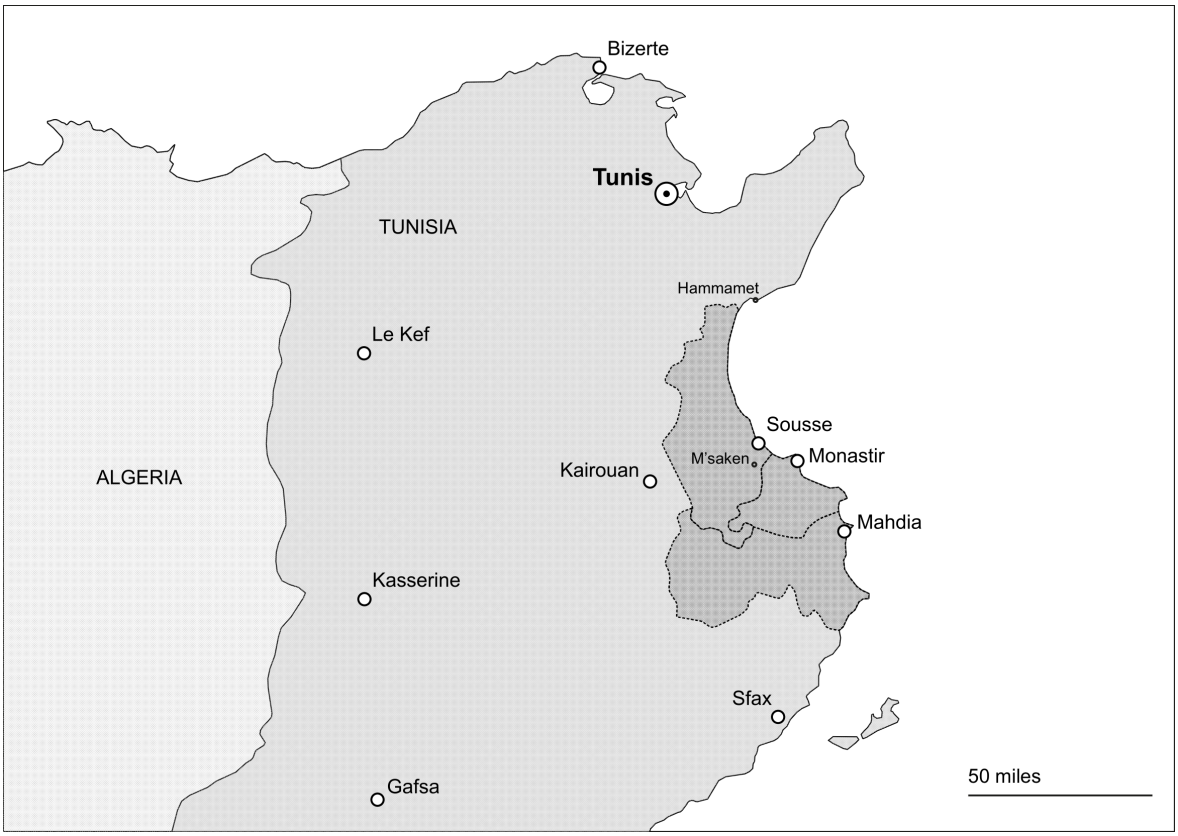


Figure 1.1: The Sahel: the governorates of Sousse, Monastir, and Mahdia.

Of all the cities in Tunisia to choose for a detailed study of an Islamist movement, Sousse might seem an unlikely candidate. The Pearl of the Sahel (*jawharat al-sāḥil*), as it is marketed, is better known for its tourism industry and its historically disproportionate political influence. The Sahel, a broad prosperous band of coastline running along the Mediterranean from just north of Sousse to the smaller cities of Monastir and Mahdia further south, was the political and economic mainspring of Tunisia at independence in 1956. Though in terms of population it counted for less than a tenth of the whole, the Sahel nonetheless was already home to an aspirational bourgeoisie, and represented what Moore described as early as 1963 as 'Tunisia's national heartland' and 'the core of the Tunisian

nation' (1963, 528). In this coastal strip, which divides the rainy climate of northern Tunisia from the desert of the south, the principal source of wealth came from thick olive groves, where individual farmers owned their land and lived together in villages rather than on the isolated farmsteads found elsewhere. They managed to avoid large-scale French settlement, which affected other areas of the country, notably the northwest, during seventy-five years of French protectorate rule. The few Europeans in the Sahel tended to be schoolteachers or civil servants (Micaud, Brown, and Moore 1964, 81). Where traditional elites had been weakened under the French, the Sahel had maintained a demographic and economic base, and was considered more prosperous than other areas of the country. As Charles Micaud framed it in the terms of early 1960s social science:

> With a certain shared tradition and an orderly life based on a relatively high level of urbanization, the Sahel, the real Tunisia, was much further along the road to modernization than the European might have realized. (1964, 9)

The wealth from olive oil allowed the emergence of a new middle class and richer parents sent their sons to schools in the capital. In 1939 half of the entering class to Sadiki College (*al-madrasa al-ṣādiqiyya*), the elite bilingual Tunis secondary school founded in 1875, were Sahelians (Moore 1965, 25). From there many went on to universities in France to study. They returned to forge the nationalist movement and then to become the administrative elite of the new nation, even though they were still considered the provincial outsider (*āfāqī*) by the Tunis-born elite (*beldī*). It was in the Sahel, in the town of Ksar Hellal, that the nationalist Neo-Destour Party held its founding congress in March 1934, not far from Monastir, home to the party's co-founder and Tunisia's first president, Habib Bourguiba. From Hammam Sousse came Ben Ali, the ambitious security officer who overthrew the ageing Bourguiba in 1987. Many of the ministers serving under Bourguiba and Ben Ali and since 2011 were drawn from the Sahelian elite, often from Sousse itself.

Throughout the post-independence period the regime, through the state media and official speeches, reinforced an image of Sousse as a beacon of economic progress and cultural splendour. By 2013 the city was still Tunisia's third largest, with a population of 220,000, in a mostly urbanised governorate covering 650,000 people (INS 2013a; INS 2013b). Sousse continued to enjoy an economic advantage, with government spending and private-sector investment frequently directed at the major metropolises. More than half of Tunisia's 11 million citizens lived within an hour's drive of Tunis, Sousse, and Sfax, the industrial city further to the south; these three cities alone accounted for 85 percent of Tunisia's gross domestic product (World Bank 2014, 282). Poverty rates in the Sahel were the lowest nationwide, while the official unemployment rate in Sousse in 2014 stood at 11.5 percent, which was below the then national average of 14.8 percent (INS 2014, 44).[2] Tunisia suffers serious regional disparities, but historically these have been to the advantage of Sousse.

The city has become the centre of Tunisia's tourism industry, boasting an unbounded succession of sprawling faux-Orientalist hotels (with names like Scheherazade, Orient Palace, Marhaba Club, Le Marabout, and Dreams Beach) that run from the Old City up five long miles of sandy beach to Port El Kantaoui. In late 2013, when this research began, music still blared from hotel beach bars and tourists in swimsuits floated above the sea on parasails towed by speedboats. Their *zone touristique* was geographically separated from the rest of the city by a long straight road, formerly Boulevard 7 novembre, marking the date of Ben Ali's coup in 1987, hurriedly renamed Boulevard 14 janvier, marking the date of his fall in 2011. The only sites of confluence between the *zone touristique* and Sousse the Tunisian city were either in the corridors of tourist hotels, where low-paid staff

[2] Tunisia's Institut National de la Statistique (INS) considers those aged fifteen or above to be of working age. Unofficial employment rates were much higher in a country where nearly two-thirds of all employment is in the informal private sector (Gatti et al. 2013, 148).



Figure 1.2: The city of Sousse in 2014, with some of its major districts.

worked in financial precarity, or in the Old City, where tourists in shorts and sandals buying over-priced trinkets passed Tunisians shopping at the market for fresh vegetables, second-hand clothes (*fripes*), and sweet doughnut treats (*bānbālūnī*) for their children. However, a short walk inland from anywhere else along the beachfront and there were no more tourists to be seen. Here Sousse spread out from relatively wealthy middle-class areas north of the Old City, to the industrial zone of Sidi Abdelhamid to the south and the poorer student suburb of Hai Riadh to the west, home to many of the migrants who came to the coast over the past five decades looking for work. The explicit geographical separation of this mass-market, low-cost tourism contributed to reproducing an impression of a Tunisia that was stable, tolerant, and by nature quiescent, what Hibou called: 'this form of *culturalisme* that is in line with the *imaginaire touristique* which confuses the professional obsequiousness of the lift boy with a quasi-natural preference for conciliation

over conflict' (Khiari and Hibou 2011, 25; cited in Willis 2016, 31). The temptation to remark on Tunisia's apparent inherent stability was often irresistible. Just months before the 2011 uprising, one history described a nation that was 'an inconspicuous island of calm in troubled seas' with 'an authoritarianism that enjoys at least the grudging support of a majority of the population' (Alexander 2010, 1, 116).

However, fragments of evidence suggest there are transgressive microhistories of Sousse still to be written. That it drew so many economic migrants from the rural interior in the decades after independence meant the city became a complex urban mix of wealth, poverty, and aspiration. From the mid-1970s onwards, the establishment of university campuses attracted a large student population, which now stands at nearly 30,000, and with it the student politics of a new middle class. New subcultures soon emerged. In the collective memory of al-Nahda there are references to one of the earliest meetings of the pioneers of the movement at the Great Mosque in the Old City in 1973, a story Ghannouchi and other senior leaders frequently recalled. In the mid-1980s, one Tunisian scholar noted that by far the most represented region within the movement at the time was the Sahel and Sfax (Hermassi 1984, 43). In 1989, when al-Nahda candidates had the rare chance to take part in elections, Sousse was one of a handful of cities in which the movement performed surprisingly well, winning nearly a third of the vote. In later years, when al-Nahda was heavily repressed, Sousse became a significant source of support for Salafist groups. Many of the hundreds of young men arrested under a new anti-terrorism law in 2003 were from Sousse, as were several of those involved in an armed confrontation with security forces in the northern town of Suleiman in 2006-7 (Geisser and Gobe 2008, 5-6). Indeed, Sousse's tourism industry was itself several times the target of terrorist attack. First, in August 1987, when hotels in Monastir and Sousse were bombed by a fringe Islamic cell, then again in October 2013, in a failed suicide bombing on the beach of the

Riadh Palms hotel, and once more in June 2015 in the deadly shooting at Port El Kantaoui. The hotels promptly emptied as the already debt-laden tourist industry sank.[3] The *imaginaire touristique* was exposed in all its superficiality.

1.4 Political ethnography

This thesis is a political ethnography based on fourteen months of fieldwork in Sousse from November 2013 to December 2014. During that period, I conducted open-ended interviews with 65 current or former members of al-Nahda in addition to interviews with another dozen members of other political parties, human rights activists, and academics. I frequently met informally with current or former members of the movement and attended rallies, celebrations, meetings, and family weddings, as well as observing at close hand the October 2014 legislative election campaign, during which I attended door-to-door campaign efforts, small-scale political events, and larger rallies. My work is framed in the wider governorate of Sousse, though much of my research focused on the city and its suburbs. (Historically the Sousse governorate included the cities of Monastir and Mahdia in an area of around 2,400 square miles until a 1974 law split the region into the three governorates that exist today: Sousse, Monastir, and Mahdia.)

My introduction to Sousse came through initial contact with a former Nahdawi political prisoner, who, when I met him in 2013, was 55 years old and married with three children. He had been an activist within the movement since he was a schoolboy at the Lycée Technique in Sousse in the late 1970s, and led religious study groups in that period. He spent eight years in jail in the 1990s and then worked with a human rights group to support former prisoners and their families, and was now employed in local government

[3] Seventeen Sousse hotels closed after the attack and the number of tourists visiting Sousse dropped 35 percent in the first half of 2016 ("Sousse terrorist attack" 2016).

administration while continuing human rights work in his free time. He found me an apartment to rent near his home in al-Khezama al-Sharqiyya, a lower middle-class area of Sousse that was near the coast and just north of the Old City. He had deep, personal connections with a wide range of al-Nahda activists to whom he introduced me, though it was only after some months of friendship and discussions that one day, as we drove around town in his van running errands, he admitted he was no longer a formal member of the movement. He had chosen not to re-join in 2011 because it clashed with his work in human rights, a decision I later discovered others too had made. Through his suggestions I began by meeting older activists who, like him, had been present at the earliest stage of the movement; some had remained within al-Nahda, others had left to pursue interests in other fields. Each activist directed me to others and so I gradually found my way into the community through a snowballing technique. In addition, I set out to meet as many members as possible from the dozen or so who had been elected to al-Nahda's Sousse regional bureau (*al-maktab al-jihawī*), and most of those who led the sixteen local bureaux (*al-makātib al-maḥalliyya*), which operated in each of the governorate's administrative districts. I met nearly all the seven senior Sousse activists who had been elected to the movement's national Consultative Council (*majlis al-shūrā*), a 150-member body which meets every three months and functions as an internal parliament. I tried to meet people several times, in order to clarify earlier comments, or to continue half-told stories, and in the hope that they would come to be more at ease speaking to an inquisitive outsider. Our discussions were conducted in a mix of formal and Tunisian Arabic, though on rare occasions we spoke in French when interviewees were as comfortable in both languages. I digitally recorded our conversations when people agreed, as well as making field notes during and after discussions and observations.

I offered all my informants the right to anonymity and I have respected that throughout the text, except when individuals explicitly asked to be named or when referring to senior public figures. For those anonymous informants, I use a single pseudonym to represent their identities. I denote positions within the movement in broad terms: local al-Nahda member, meaning an ordinary low-level member; local leader, meaning one of the dozen or so individuals elected to a local bureau; regional leader, meaning one of the dozen or so individuals elected to the Sousse regional bureau, some of whom may also have been elected to the Consultative Council; and senior leader, meaning a high-ranking member of the movement usually based in Tunis and often not represented on their local regional bureau but sitting in the Consultative Council or the smaller and more senior Executive Bureau (*al-maktab al-tanfīdhī*). In order to reinforce and contextualise the accounts of my informants, I draw on interviews with non-Islamists from Sousse and from written archival sources, including historic al-Nahda documents, published memoirs, court transcripts, reports by human rights associations, and newspaper articles preserved by individuals themselves, or found online or in the national press archives, the National Centre of Documentation (Markaz al-Tawthiq al-Watani) in Tunis.

This is a work of political ethnography in that it relies on prolonged immersion in a community and seeks to reach 'a sensibility that goes beyond face-to-face contact' in order to consider the meanings that the Tunisians I study attribute to their social and political reality (Schatz 2009, 5). Such an approach helps to reconstruct the informal workings of power relations, to illustrate stages of mobilisation that have otherwise been obscured, and to capture micro-mechanisms of change and resistance outside the formal centres of power and politics (Kubick 2009). This focus on insider perspectives offers important benefits. It gives agency to social and political actors by asking how they view political situations, rather than relying on structural explanations. It can help explain behavioural outcomes by

showing how individuals connect their own understandings to the broader project of the movement and how ordinary members receive and interpret messages from the leaders. It also offers insights on self-perception and identity politics, showing how collective meanings are formed, how they influence political processes, and how individuals understand them (Bayard de Volo and Schatz 2004). This study does not seek to generalise about the al-Nahda movement as a whole, and even less about 'Islamism' as a single, unified concept. Instead, it engages with the work of scholars who have studied similar movements elsewhere in a dialogue about diverse, changing Islamisms.

In part, the story of al-Nahda and its forerunners is about understanding the effect and impact of state power at close range and the forms of resistance it produced. Again, ethnography offers the possibility of understanding what this meant to individuals. As Carol Greenhouse notes:

> People's altered lives challenge them—and with them, ethnographers—to redefine order and disorder, losing and winning, cooperation and resistance, oppression and solidarity, mobilization and denial, violence and humane affirmation, structure and agency, hegemony and resistance. (Greenhouse 2002, 8)

The question of resistance to state power, both at a formal governmental level and in the public sphere, is a recurring theme: what formal and informal shapes it took, how and when decisions on resistance were taken, where resistance was absent and why, what cooperation took place with non-Islamists, how resistance changed over time. As has been considered elsewhere, the nature of resistance can also function as a 'diagnostic of power', revealing the structures and strategies of power, how they change over time and how people are caught up by them (Abu-Lughod 1990, 42). Forms of resistance often correlate with forms of power, reflecting the way people have experienced power itself (Tripp 2013, 14).

In the sharply polarised political atmosphere of Tunisia in the months and years after the 2011 uprising, it became commonplace for political rivals and civil society figures

to accuse al-Nahda of indulging in a dangerous doublespeak (*khiṭāb muzdawij*) in which it professed democratic credentials in public only to adhere to a secret theocratic agenda in private. This critique bore a striking familiarity to the way al-Nahda's project was dismissed in the late 1980s by others in the Tunisian opposition, some of whom sided with the Ben Ali regime when it began its wave of exclusion and repression against the Islamists. The return of this trope of doublespeak in the new era was not lost on the anxious Nahdawis themselves. As Burgat reminds us, when Islamists make statements embracing democratic values they are doubted and dismissed, yet when they make statements apparently distancing themselves from democratic values it becomes timeless proof of their obscurantism (2003, 5). For a researcher, this also raises questions of reliability and normative bias. How credible were the accounts given by the informants I interviewed? It is difficult, of course, to know with any complete certainty. Were they presenting a particular image of the movement that they wanted me to hear? Perhaps they were, at least initially, when on meeting an unfamiliar researcher informants were inclined to present a defensive image of their movement as non-violent, democratic, and homogenous at a time of heated, polarised debates in the Tunisian media. However, the object of this enterprise is not to reveal some hidden objective truth, but rather to build up an admittedly untidy and blurred image of how these individuals acted, why they acted in the way they did, and what they believe motivated them. In an effort to reach beyond this insipid official account of the movement, I asked the same people the same questions at different times, and I asked other people those questions too, in the hope of corroborating accounts. However fallible, these oral histories are particularly important as evidence given that so much of the written documentation from the movement's early years of activism was systematically destroyed by the Tunisian intelligence agencies and police. How much might personal biases have affected my interpretations? Certainly they did, but the

appropriate response is surely to be open to critical self-reflection and to conduct fieldwork as transparently as possible. Schwedler argues all studies of Islamists carry the challenge of acknowledging our own normative commitments as researchers: how a researcher with a vision of secular liberalism may support the inclusion of Islamists in a democratisation process without agreeing with their sometimes restrictive vision of social relations and freedoms of expression (2006, xi-xiii). Even though I did not always agree with the opinions of my informants, I hope to have faithfully represented the words and narratives of those I spoke with, not least because these were people who suffered years in prison and in social exclusion as a result of their political beliefs and yet willingly gave me their stories. This research is not about the normative, and rather tired, endeavour of judging how much al-Nahda was indeed a 'democratic' or 'liberal' movement, but rather to understand what meanings its members gave to such concepts, and others too, and why those meanings developed over time.

This work takes an historic view, reaching back to accounts of experiences as early as the 1970s when informants were school children or young adults. This was in part shaped by the nature of the accounts that emerged from my first meetings, in which it soon became clear that individuals' early period of formation in the movement had fundamentally shaped the meanings of their actions. In addition, though, it was an explicit effort to reach beyond a static snapshot of where al-Nahda stood today, in order to capture the trajectories of change within the community over time, the internal debates, and the reimagining of concepts, ideas, and ambitions. The periodisation of this history is mine, but it broadly maps the stages of development of the movement from preaching group, to apparently politicised movement, to repression in prison and after prison, and culminating in the post-uprising experience. The fieldwork site reaches back beyond the present to decipher fragments of history and memory and also draws, where possible, on surviving

historical material to supplement ethnographic fieldwork, encouraged by those who promote the possibilities of an historicised anthropology in explaining complex social processes (Des Chene 1997; Comaroff and Comaroff 1992). This research attends to the small details of individual lives that made up the broader movement. It sets out to explain what role all ranks of the Islamist movement, not just the elite leadership, played in mobilising for collective action and in sustaining the idea of the movement during the decades of repression. It adopts the idea that an intensive study of particular lives, experiences and mentalities of ordinary people can solve broader puzzles, in this case the resilience and adaptation of the Islamist idea and the nature of popular culture that lay behind it. Shifting the researcher's attention away from movement leaders towards ordinary members at the local level, and a reconstruction of their everyday practices of ordinary life, offers an approach that highlights the significance of individual daily acts and their meanings.

Conclusion

This thesis is a political ethnography of Tunisia's al-Nahda movement in Sousse. It draws on concepts of meaning making, *da'wa*, informal networks, and intellectual adaptation in order to construct a new approach to the Tunisian movement. It privileges the local, non-elite members of the movement and their life experiences to challenge conventional studies focused on movement leaders and formal politics.

Three themes emerge. First, the relationship between the political and the religious within the movement has been conflicting and ultimately irreconcilable, rather than interdependent and cohesive. For a movement that, like other Islamist groups in the region, proposed a 'comprehensive' vision of Islam, there was a striking tension at the heart of this intellectual project. Second, at the local level we find the sources of the movement's resilience inside Tunisia during the decades of repression: deep, informal networks, an

individual reimagining of the Islamist project, and activism on the movement's periphery. The paradox of al-Nahda is that the movement re-emerged quickly following the popular uprising against Ben Ali, despite two decades of repression. Al-Nahda had not been able to rely on those elements understood from research elsewhere to be so crucial to Islamist resilience, yet in 2011 it rebuilt itself rapidly. Third, al-Nahda has undergone a series of strategic and intellectual adaptations to the changing political context of Tunisia but those adaptations incurred a cost to internal organisational stability and coherence of vision. In the post-2011 environment, al-Nahda underwent perhaps its most significant adaptation yet as it reshaped its project to a new discourse of liberties, democracy, and human rights while holding fast to the anchor of the Islamic reference. Movements such as al-Nahda are highly adaptive to their environment, yet such adaptation comes at a cost, both organisational and intellectual. Ideological change, in other words, has produced internal fragmentation.

The thesis is structured chronologically. Chapter 2 addresses the origins of the movement in Sousse to ask why it first emerged in the city and what mechanisms of mobilisation were deployed. Chapter 3 rethinks the politicisation of the movement in the 1980s to challenge those previous assumptions that suggest the movement grew more and more distant from its preaching origins during this period. The effect of two decades of repression is considered in Chapter 4, which excavates the prison experience, with its intellectual evaluations and physical acts of resistance, and Chapter 5, which argues that social exclusion disaggregated the movement into its constituent parts. Chapter 6 asks why the movement so quickly began to fragment after 2011 even as activists rebuilt and redefined their project. In conclusion, Chapter 7 gives reasons for the tension between politics and preaching within the movement, interrogates the party-movement separation of

2016, and asks what lessons similar Islamist experiences in the region might offer al-Nahda.

2 The Search for a New Morality

> We started preaching and it was about bringing people back to the mosque and back to prayers. There were meetings open to everyone in the style of *da'wa*, about how Islam means doing good to others, to help others to follow the correct path . . . We did little trips to villages, going into the mosques and explaining to people their religion, how to pray, how to do ablutions. It started like that . . . And people followed me because they knew my family, and they had confidence in me and recognised that what I said was the right path.
>
> *Abdallah, a former medical student from a prominent Sousse family who was one of the first of a new wave of preachers in the city in the early 1970s*.

There is a tendency to hasten through the early years of the al-Nahda movement, disregarding them as some form of intellectually and organisationally discrete 'religious' stage, which was soon replaced by a more mature and important 'political' formation. This occurs just as much with the movement's own accounts of its history as with scholars observing from outside. This chapter, however, argues that the ideas and actions first established in the 1970s remained central to the way al-Nahda's members, particularly at the local level, continued to conceive of their movement. By these ideas and actions, I mean mosque preaching (as led by men like Abdallah, above), discussions of morality, faith, and behaviour, and the informal networks these inspired. This chapter seeks to bring religion back into our understanding of the movement and to consider the role that faith and morality played within the organisation. Of course, I do not mean to argue that religion was the sole motivational factor, because clearly the socio-economic context, political aspirations, cultural contests, and opportunities for action also shaped mobilisation. Rather, I mean to suggest that even from its earliest days the collective action represented by a new preaching movement in the 1970s was about more than merely using religious vocabulary to express political, economic, social, or structural grievances. It was about faith and belief as pillars in themselves. In this sense I draw on those who argue that ideas, in this case

religious faith, can matter as much as interests in forging mobilisation within social movements (Smith 1996, 5-7; Wickham 2002, 13; Tuğal 2002, 95).

From the early 1970s large groups of young people began to gather regularly at a handful of mosques in Tunis to listen to a new generation of preachers, including Rachid Ghannouchi, a philosophy graduate and former Arab nationalist born in the southern town of El Hamma in 1941;[4] Abdelfattah Mourou, a charismatic lawyer from Tunis born in 1948; and Hmida Ennaifer, a theologian born in Tunis in 1942 who had studied at the historic Zaytuna mosque-university and the Sorbonne in Paris. These preachers offered an energising reassessment of their faith, giving classes explaining Qur'anic passages, or methods of prayer or worship, or presenting Islam as a comprehensive guide for life. Though most of their work was in Tunis, these men also travelled through the country, spreading their ideas and encouraging their supporters. In Sousse a number of sympathisers together built their own branch of this movement, forged again around mosque classes, a new search for morality, and what proved to be robust informal networks in schools, universities, villages, and mosques. These networks established a new religious community, even in a city long considered a stronghold of the more secular political and economic elite of the new Tunisian nation.

This chapter explores the political and economic context of Sousse in the early 1970s before analysing the nature of the first religious activism in the city through preaching and mosque classes. It explains the deep personal relationships built through networks at schools, universities, and mosques to show the inter-connectedness that bound together members of a shared project. Finally, it assesses the organisational development of the movement as it matured towards the end of the decade.

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[4] Ghannouchi told Burgat he was an Arab nationalist until June 1966, at which point he realised: 'I had believed in an Arabism for which I was prepared to die but which was in fact opposed to the Islam which had nourished me and of which I was proud' (Burgat 2003, 36).

2.1 Sousse in the 1970s

By the early 1970s Sousse was still an important city, the third largest in Tunisia, but not as economically strong as it expected to be. It attracted financial firms, with nine banks, eight insurance companies and a number of private lenders, and had a growing service sector, according to a contemporary study by a Tunisian academic (Fahem 1968, 287). Most secondary schools in the Sahel region were in Sousse, and drew in more than two-thirds of their students from the surrounding rural areas or from further north up the coast, which would become a significant factor in the early days of Islamist activism (Fahem 1968, 290). The city also hosted the main food markets for the region, and the most important transport hub outside Tunis. However, despite a political importance disproportionate to its small size, Sousse faced a moment of great social and economic dislocation at the start of the decade. Though agriculture remained an element of Sousse's economy, it was in decline. Farming and fishing employed only 6.5 percent of the city's working population in 1963, and by the late 1960s the olive forests were neglected and ageing. Large land owners were disappearing as they divided up their land for heirs or sold it off in small parcels, and Sousse in general seemed to show a 'lack of interest' in agricultural issues (Fahem 1968, 284). The port of Sousse, which should have been a vibrant source of trade, was ranked only fourth in the country because repairs had been slow after it had been badly damaged in the Second World War. Sousse continued to export halfa grass, used in the manufacture of paper, as well as salt, grain, and olive oil. However, Tunisia's primary natural resource, phosphate from the southern mines of Gafsa, was exported out of the industrial city of Sfax, further down the coast. Moreover, the population of Sousse was growing rapidly, reaching 56,000 in 1966, according to the government census, a 14 percent increase in the previous decade since independence fuelled by a rural exodus of job seekers who quickly filled new suburbs on the edges of the

city (Fahem 1968, 295).[5] Yet Sousse appeared to be losing its national influence as the cities of Tunis and Sfax grew more economically powerful. In Sousse, rapid population growth and a faltering agricultural sector had brought 'the economic decline of the city' (Fahem 1968, 293-4). Industry was seen by local party officials and business interests as in urgent need of expansion—Sousse represented only 9 percent of national industrial activity, and ranked far behind Sfax and Tunis, because of poorer infrastructure, lesser trade at the port, an unfavourable tax environment, and a lack of skilled labour (Bouslama 1972, 8-9). In March 1973 the governor of Sousse, Mohamed Ennaceur, was already warning of growing unemployment, which he said stood at 5,000 in the Sahel but which was expected to rise to 15,000 by the end of the decade, especially affecting young people (Badri 1973).[6] That year the Sousse governorate identified the nascent tourist industry as the target for most inward job-creating investment, including the new 1,200-bed el-Hana Beach hotel on the seafront, followed by agriculture and an emerging industrial sector, which included textile exporters, food producers, small clothing manufacturers, and mechanics firms ("Governorate de Sousse" 1973, 5). There was already a sense of urgency in the regional government's planning.

Indeed, the early 1970s were a time of national malaise. Over the previous decade the regime had dramatically shifted economic development towards a planned economy, with import-substituting industrialisation and the creation of 1,500 mostly agricultural cooperatives under Ahmed Ben Salah, a former leader of the Tunisian General Labour

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[5] The wider governorate was home to 511,000 Tunisians in 1966, around a tenth of the national population, up 15 percent from the previous decade.

[6] The career of Mohamed Ennaceur, who was born in El Jem, in the Sahel, in 1934, illustrates a common trajectory of the Sahelian administrative elite. Educated in Tunis and Paris, he was appointed governor of Sousse and was twice minister for social affairs under Bourguiba. Under Ben Ali he was assigned to the Tunisian mission to the UN in Geneva and then worked as a private sector consultant. He returned to political life after the 2011 uprising, serving again as minister for social affairs in 2011. He joined the Nidaa Tounes party in early 2014 as vice-president, won election in the Mahdia constituency in October 2014, and, at the age of 80, was appointed speaker of the new parliament.

Union (al-Ittihad al-ʿAmm al-Tunisi li-l-Shughl, UGTT) and now minister of planning, finance, and economy, and himself a Sahelian from Moknine. However, rather than reform and modernise agriculture as intended, this 'Tunisian socialism' brought economic and social difficulties, including a significant decline in agricultural production and a series of strikes. In early 1969 Ben Salah announced he would expand his cooperatives into the politically-influential olive farms of the Sahel. However, this was too much for the ruling party, by now renamed the Destourian Socialist Party (al-Hizb al-Ishtiraki al-Dusturi, PSD). The party turned against Ben Salah and then Bourguiba sacked and jailed him. From 1970, under the new prime minister, Hedi Nouira, a former central bank governor from Monastir, the government began a series of liberalising *infitāḥ* economic reforms, shifting the economy to export-oriented development, focused on phosphate, petroleum, olive oil, and textiles (Alexander 2010, 76). For Sousse one of the most important changes came in 1972 with Law 72-38, which offered foreign export-oriented firms a ten-year tax break and then further tax reductions (Republic of Tunisia 1972). This encouraged foreign-owned exporters to set up in Sousse and the Sahel, and in 1973 the Sousse governorate already forecast it would bring in 2,100 new jobs that year alone ("Governorate de Sousse" 1973). As we will see this law would go on to offer unanticipated opportunities for Sousse's al-Nahda activists during the hard years of repression under Ben Ali. Good weather in the early 1970s helped grain and olive oil harvests, however regional competition soon began to weaken olive oil and phosphate prices. Recession in Europe and new European tariffs on textiles also contributed to a decline in Tunisian exports in the second half of the 1970s and through the 1980s. Restoring economic growth remained an ongoing challenge.

The failure of the 1960s experiment left Bourguiba vulnerable. He was weak both physically, after suffering a heart attack in 1967, and politically. His illness and his poor judgement over Ben Salah triggered a bout of political jockeying within the party. Ahmed

Mestiri was expelled in 1971 for pressing for reform and soon set up his own party, the Movement of Socialist Democrats (Harakat al-Dimuqratiyyin al-Ishtirakiyyin, MDS), while Bourguiba tried to drown out the increasingly urgent succession debate by appointing himself president-for-life in 1974. At this point the left presented the most acute political challenge: its influence was growing within the UGTT, on university campuses, and particularly through the Group of Studies and Socialist Action in Tunisia (Tajammuʿ al-Dirasat wa-l-ʿAmal al-Ishtiraki fi Tunis, GEAST), a leftist student group known by its influential journal *Perspectives*, many of whose members were jailed for protests against the regime. Industrial unrest culminated in a major UGTT strike in late January 1978, Black Thursday, the first general strike since independence, which triggered clashes that left dozens, perhaps hundreds, dead. The violence reached even the privileged city of Sousse, where armed pro-regime militias were sent to attack the local UGTT headquarters in the city centre (Rollinde 1999, 113). As many as 101 trade unionists were brought before the Criminal Chamber of the Court of Appeal in Sousse on charges connected to the January protests, including incitement and calling for armed demonstrations, and they were eventually sent to the State Security Court for trial ("Sousse: Poursuite du procès" 1978; Rollinde 1999, 114).

Much less obvious amid this industrial protest from the left was a gradual wave of religiosity which began to spread through Tunisia from the late 1960s. This was part of a broader Islamic revival across the Arab world: a new religious ethos marked by increased mosque attendance, new Qurʾanic classes, the consumption of religious literature and the wearing of the hijab, all of which was much observed, for example, in Egypt (Wickham 2002; Mahmood 2005, 3; Rock-Singer 2015). It reached Tunisia too. One Tunisian sociologist identified this new period of Islamic revival as early as 1973 but saw it in terms of a power struggle among the party elite in which modernist intellectuals were using a

‘reactivation of tradition’ to win the support of old party activists and peasants at a time of political weakness (Zghal 1973). Others, however, pointed at more structural causes that suggested this was a modern, not traditional, phenomenon. John Entelis used an attitudinal survey to observe a growing disaffection among young Tunisians and the emergence of a ‘counter-culture’ based on an awareness of and pride in being Arab and a ‘strong emotional attachment to Islam’, though one that stressed cultural over strictly religious heritage (1974, 559). Another attitudinal survey suggested there was a marked increase in personal religious attachments between the late 1960s and early 1970s, with an increase in prayer and in attention to ideas of morality and faith, particularly among Tunisians disadvantaged by modernisation (Tessler 1980). There were also journalistic observations of this new phenomenon. In February 1976 *Jeune Afrique* reported a new dress code on the streets of Tunis: young women wearing long dresses and a veil covering their head and shoulders ("Reflets de la vie" 1976). Of course, not all those who were rediscovering Islam during this period were part of the new preaching movement that eventually evolved into al-Nahda. Many were merely looking for an individual reconnection with their religion. Others among the preachers disagreed at an early stage with the direction this new movement was taking: a handful split off to form their own apolitical intellectual trend, the Progressive Islamists (al-Islamiyyun al-Taqaddumiyyun) (Burgat 1993, 208). However, a small but influential group, led by a handful of charismatic preachers, came to stand out amidst this broader religious revival. A report in 1979 described a consciously-chosen way of life, in which individuals spoke Arabic rather than French, showed growing interest in a particular Islamist literature, often of Egyptian origin, and circulated cassettes of mosque preaching (Belhassen 1979). Large crowds gathered in the capital Tunis to attend classes led by the preachers, Ghannouchi, Mourou, Ennaifer and Hassen Godhbani. Briefly these men were part of the Association for the Preservation of the Qurʾan (al-Jamʿiyya li-l-

Muhafaza ʿala al-Qurʾan al-Karim), which was formed in 1967 as a state-sanctioned organisation to spread Qurʾanic teaching and which served briefly as a meeting place for more religiously-inclined figures within the regime and the new generation of preachers (Camau and Geisser 2003, 277). At this stage some sympathetic Zaytunian shaykhs, who favoured Arabisation and Arab-Islamic cultural patrimony, tried to draw the preachers into the ruling party in order to change it from within (Hermassi 1984, 47-8). However, the preachers rejected these overtures and soon the government expelled them from the association for fear they were becoming a threat (Shahin 1997, 72). As a result, they began to focus on their own movement, and in the mid-1970s they came together as the loosely-organised Islamic Group, the first clear structural precursor of what later became al-Nahda.

It was in this context of political and economic uncertainty in the early 1970s that the preaching movement spread to Sousse and began to establish itself rapidly throughout the city and the wider governorate. Soon the movement generated its own momentum independently of the leading preachers in Tunis.

2.2 Origins of Islamist activism

The earliest years of the emerging Islamic revival in the 1970s in Tunisia were marked by techniques adopted from the early twentieth century South Asian preaching movement, the Group of Call and Communication (Jamaʿat al-Daʿwa wa-l-Tabligh). Ghannouchi, who was among the co-founders of the Islamic Group, had encountered and worked with the Tabligh while a student in Paris, as had other Tunisian Islamists. Even those who had not been students abroad had encountered South Asians from the Tabligh, particularly Pakistanis, travelling through Tunisia in the late 1960s and inviting people to join them for sessions at local mosques, including in Sousse, where they spoke of rediscovering Islam. These transnational influences offered innovative new sources of faith-based activism. The

Tunisian preachers borrowed their approach, travelling through the country from mosques to beaches to coffee shops to market stalls, calling believers to Islam through preaching.

Among the first preachers in Sousse were a pair of teenagers. One, Yahya, was born in the rural village of Sidi Bou Ali in 1952 and was training to become a teacher. He had been profoundly moved by meeting Pakistanis from the Tabligh in Sousse in the late 1960s, when he was a pupil at a boarding school in the city (Yahya). His friend Habib was born in 1951 to a family in the Old City. He had not finished school, but had spent several months in Italy looking for work. The pair met at a Qurʾanic discussion class and then began travelling from Sousse to neighbouring small towns and holding meetings to identify and train like-minded young believers. Their work drew heavily on the subject matter of the Tabligh: how to pray correctly, how to behave, even how to dress. From there the next step was to grow the community, by encouraging believers to attend classes and by recruiting and training new preachers to teach them. This was a young generation speaking to and drawing in its peers. The preachers, with their autodidactic revivalism, intentionally subverted the traditional power structure of state-approved, state-approving clerics. Habib, who by 2014 was retired and volunteering in an association working on local governance, explained:

> We moved from place to place. We trained people and we nominated people to be responsible for lessons there every day between *maghrib* and *ʿishāʾ* prayers. There were no shaykhs to do the studies, it was us who led the classes. We were training ourselves at the time . . . Our enthusiasm pushed us to make the first core (*nawāat*) of the Islamic movement.

Their target was young people of their own age to whom they were careful to offer a vigorous programme far removed from the clerics in the mosque with their staid traditional sermons.

> You should give the youth in the mosque some fun, give them a good climate in order to attract them. Most young people love football, so after morning prayers we played football with the sunrise. And we directed the young people. For example, we sat them in a circle and told them: "You are playing with your

> brothers and you should not harm them, you should not shout at them, you shouldn't speak nonsense or harm your brother with hurtful words". Through football we were bringing them up. (Habib)

The priority at this stage was the creation of a community formed around shared beliefs and teachings. It enveloped these young men and women in a new solidarity of belonging.

From the earliest moments there were important connections of ideas and individuals between Sousse and Tunis, 80 miles away. One Sunday in 1973 a group of several dozen young men and women gathered for a weekly discussion meeting in Sousse's Great Mosque, a handsome ninth-century twin-domed sandstone structure inside the crenelated walls of the Old City. These meetings, known as circles (*ḥalaqāt*), were held regularly between afternoon and sunset prayers over the previous months as the religious revival gained ground. Abdallah, a young medical student born in 1952 into a wealthy Sousse family, was another of the new preachers to lead the discussions in the city. While studying in the capital Tunis he had been inspired by well-attended mosque classes given by the charismatic preachers in the capital. At weekends, Abdallah would come home to Sousse and try to replicate their classes. On that Sunday Ghannouchi, Mourou, and Ennaifer drove down to the coastal city to join Abdallah's group at the Great Mosque for the first time. They sat, prayed, and discussed religious questions together—as many as ninety attended, by one count (Hamdi 1998, 20). However, as they emerged into the Old City at the end of their discussions, the political police were waiting for them. Abdallah described the scene:

> The policemen said: "What are you doing?" I explained what we were doing, that we were preaching in the mosque, and he said: "No! It's completely forbidden." I told him I didn't know it was forbidden and he took us to the police station.

Eventually they were released after several hours of interrogation because one policeman knew Abdallah's father, who had rented him some land. The three preachers from Tunis were ordered to return home. It was the movement's first emergence in public in Sousse and its first encounter with the police, who were yet to see this religious revival as a

political threat (Ghannouchi 2011, 52). It became a storied event, much retold within the movement particularly during the prison years. Forty-one years later, during the October 2014 election campaign, Ghannouchi invoked his memory of the police encounter as he addressed a large crowd of al-Nahda supporters at the Sousse port, a few hundred yards from the Great Mosque. 'It was the first meeting of the Islamic movement! And despite the fact that the meeting resulted in us being taken to the police station and spending most of the night in the police station, that was the start of the Islamic movement!' (Ghannouchi 2014).

The first leaders of this community in Sousse came from surprisingly different social and educational backgrounds, which stretched beyond the assumption that Islamic activism originated in a marginalised lower middle-class (see, for example: Hermassi 1984, 43). Yahya had been a pupil in Sousse and then went to a teacher-training college in Tunis, returning home at weekends and in the summer. He was a pro-Palestinian, pro-Fatah nationalist activist within the leftist-dominated student union, the General Union of Students of Tunisia (al-Ittihad al-ʿAmm li-Talabat Tunis, UGET). In subsequent decades he remained on the intellectual periphery of the Islamist movement, even joining a centre-left political party in the 2000s, despite his strong and enduring personal relationships with fellow Islamists forged during this initial period. Habib, his colleague, left school before completing his studies and worked in a bookshop in Sousse. Both came from modest social backgrounds. However, others came from much wealthier families. Abdallah, who was present at the 1973 meeting in the Great Mosque, was from a well-known Sousse family: his father owned a large area of land in the centre of the city and later helped fund the construction of a nearby mosque. Abdallah himself had gone to Tunis to study medicine, a prestigious, high-achieving degree. One of the young men attending at these early mosque discussions in the 1970s was Mohamed Chemli, who was born in 1960 into a wealthy

trading family in the city, which still ran a fabric business after 2011 and maintained its original store in the Old City. Chemli became the leader of the Sousse region for the movement in the late 1980s and was re-appointed to the post after the 2011 uprising. Though the movement was largely made up of lower middle-class young people, most of whom were the first in their family to attend university, it also included some who were wealthier and some who were not among the student community. Not all came from the poor, marginalised interior of the country. As one activist from the 1970s said:

> We gathered all this flock, from the rich to the poor to the middle class, all types of people and all social levels. The idea that it began only with the oppressed (*al-mustaḍʿafīn*) is not correct.[7] The movement was a movement of pupils and some were from the countryside and were oppressed but in mixing with other pupils from the cities it gathered all this flock together, this mixed texture. (Khairi)

While some were born into families from central Sousse itself, others came from nearby towns or villages, where one inspirational figure could produce significant pockets of Islamist support. Mahmoud, a young medical student who was an early preacher in Sousse, came from the village of Beni Hassan, south of Monastir, which was home to several other notable activists, including a future leader of the Monastir region. Another prominent earlier leader, Ali Nouir, came from Chorbane, a village near El Jem. Nouir, who was born in 1949, was a maths teacher who taught locally and who inspired several others from his extended family and from Chorbane to join the movement. Nouir served as the movement's leader in the Sahel for a period.[8]

This group of activists from divergent backgrounds were bound together by what Bayat has elsewhere called 'imagined solidarities', defined as common interests and shared

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[7] This word, the oppressed (*al-mustaḍʿafīn*), has a particular resonance, both as a Qur'anic term and because it was used by Ali Shariati, the Iranian intellectual, who interwove Islamic and Marxist concepts (Montgomery Watt 2013, 134). It appears in the June 1981 founding statement of the successor to the Islamic Group, the Islamic Tendency Movement, as we will see in Chapter 3.

[8] Ali Nouir (1943-2000) later taught maths in Medenine, where one of his pupils was Ali Laarayedh, a senior al-Nahda leader who was prime minister in 2013-14. Nouir was jailed in 1981, 1987-88 and 1991-94, and then died of ill-health in 2000 (al-Amaduni 2016).

values spontaneously constructed by different actors between themselves (2005, 904). The shared value most frequently cited by the Sousse activists was a reassertion of Islam's place in the modern world, and thus the building of an alternate modernity. This both reversed the marginalisation of religious knowledge and rebutted a modernisation thesis that suggested scientific advances had rendered religion outmoded. It was not merely to argue that Islam was compatible with science, but that Islam had been a source of science. For example, the young preacher Yahya was influenced by a book by an Indian Islamic scholar, Wahiduddin Khan, entitled *al-Islam Yatahadda* (Islam Defies), which was originally published in Urdu in 1966, then translated into Arabic in 1974 (and later published in English as *God Arises*). In this book Khan challenged the prevailing view that scientific empiricism had eclipsed man's need for religion. Instead, he proposed that Qurʾanic verses anticipated modern scientific discoveries, and that materialism was the cause of a 'deep-rooted malaise' in modern society: 'While man's body receives more and more nourishment, his soul is gradually being killed. Materially, he is pampered; spiritually, he is starved' (Khan 2005, 294). Similarly, many activists read *La Bible, le Coran et la Science*, published in 1976 by the French doctor Maurice Bucaille, a convert to Islam, who argued that the Qurʾan accurately predicted modern scientific discoveries and that therefore Islam still had an important role to play in the modern world. These ideas had a particular resonance in Tunisia where Bourguiba endeavoured to supersede religious faith with modernism. One early activist in Sousse had taken part as a schoolboy in a demonstration in Kairouan in the mid-1960s in protest at Bourguiba's efforts to discourage Tunisians from observing the Ramadan fast. Several activists, including this man, came from families where a father, uncle, or grandfather had studied at some level at the Zaytuna

mosque university, one of the first targets of Bourguiba's secularising policies.[9] Given the symbolism of the attack on Zaytuna, it is perhaps not surprising that many scholars adopt a cultural explanation for this Islamic revival, as if this was a 'counter-elite in search of a more culturally authentic alternative' (Shahin 1997, 72), or 'the rocket of decolonization's third stage' after the political and economic (Burgat 1993, 4). Yet, it was not just cultural: there was a sense too of personal humiliation at the banishment of Islam from the public sphere. Their shared hostility to Bourguiban secularising was not primarily political, but moral. The resistance against a state-led civilisational project was often a very personal crafting of an alternative modernity, in which science and Islam, for example, were closely intertwined.

For the young adherents to this new trend, faith and morality were the most important binding elements in their imagined solidarity. This was forged through 'educational work' (*al-ʿamal al-tarbawī*) and 'raising awareness' (*al-tawʿiyya*): a focus on renewing the precepts of the faith and the manner of belief through memorisation of the Qurʾan and the hadith, and reform of the individual (though notably not, at this stage, reform of the state). This was called an 'ethical reform' (*al-iṣlāḥ al-akhlāqī*), in which faith was renewed by the ritual of practice through regular meetings of believers in mosque classes, study groups, sports events, or on day trips. It would be wrong to categorise the movement at this stage as Islamist, for there was still no political element to the broader vision. The preoccupation was with living a good life on earth and using Islam as a solution to daily dilemmas, hence the focus on morality and ethical behaviour in a period

[9] Zaytuna had been a centre of Islamic teaching since the mid-eighth century, but was marginalised during the French Protectorate. From 1912 to 1951 Zaytuna offered three levels of diploma, the lower levels of which were taught through a number of Zaytuna schools across the country: aptitude (*al-ahliyya*), proficiency (*al-taḥṣīl*), and scholarship (*al-ʿilmiyya*). From 1951 the system was modified so that the proficiency degree was divided into two parts and was equivalent to a baccalaureate. From 1958, under Bourguiba's reforms, Zaytuna was integrated into the public education system and then from March 1961 Zaytuna lost its independence and was incorporated into the new University of Tunis as the small Faculty of Shariʿa and Theology.

when many sensed a spiritual vacuum. 'It was an Islam which was linked to your ordinary everyday life, not an Islam that's a bit utopian and about waiting for paradise. This was about someone who did good deeds,' said Abdallah, the medical student preacher. He quoted a Qurʾanic verse that was popular at that time: 'Those who believe and perform righteous deeds, theirs shall be Gardens of refuge, as a welcome for that which they used to do' [32:19], which highlights how the declaration of faith is not in itself sufficient unless put into practice.[10] Perhaps these individuals wanted in hindsight to present a particular faith-driven account of their early experiences as cover for sensitive or material explanatory factors, perhaps psychological or economic. Yet it is striking how frequently dozens of informants gave similar, detailed descriptions of the role of faith and morality in explaining these early years of activism. If we take these explanations at face value, it is this extra dimension of morality through activism that carries us beyond once-popular psychological explanations for the Islamic revival, in which it was proposed that structural strains triggered 'psycho-social alienation' and 'a quest for positive self-identity' (Waltz 1986, 665). This rather determinant and structural approach always fell short in explaining why these young Tunisians chose a religious course of participation over other movements, be they leftist, unionist, or Arab nationalist, and why their activism endured beyond moments of socio-economic crisis. The transcendent motivation and the embrace of a new community offered by religious faith and morality offers an answer.

Embedded in this Islamic revival was an ethic of action, which soon became a collective mobilisation. 'Our religion imposes on us to be active and to help others and to be productive,' as Abdallah, the medical student, put it. Another described it as a 'way of life' (*manhaj ḥayāa*): 'Islam must guide all our life not just our prayer, but all our

[10] All Qurʾanic translations are taken from *The Study Quran* (Nasr 2015).

behaviour' (Sahbi). This echoes the social activism identified in later years in the parallel Egyptian Islamic revival, what Janine Clark calls the reinvention of the concept of *da'wa* to become 'the very act of "activating" Islam through deed in all spheres of life' (2004, 14). In Sousse this activism grew during the 1970s from mosque classes open to all, to informal networks and private study groups at home, and eventually into an organised semi-formal movement structure. At the heart, though, was a particular understanding of faith that bound believers together and shaped their behaviours, individually and collectively.

Here was a new generation of young Tunisians who challenged the tired clerical structures of their mosques and bound themselves together in a new, youthful imagined solidarity, forged around the transcendent motivation of faith and morality. They sought an alternative modernity, shaped by religious faith and the ethic of action. Increasingly the shared religious teachings also began to mould a series of resilient informal networks.

2.3 School and university networks

The development of the Islamic Group throughout Sousse and the Sahel in the second half of the 1970s relied on a remarkable network of inspiration and recruitment conducted through schools and university faculties. This created a firm web of relationships that proved profoundly resilient. The most important secondary schools in the Sahel at this stage were in Sousse itself and they drew in pupils not just from the city but from villages and small towns across the region. The pupils would live together in shared dormitories during term and this communal environment far from home was conducive to recruiting new adherents. An unexpected repercussion of Bourguiba's marginalisation of Zaytuna was that many of its graduates who might otherwise have become clerics instead qualified as teachers of Arabic or of religious and civics education in the public school system, and were employed in both primary and secondary schools (Zeghal 2010, 117). Secular schools

were not producing enough such teachers, particularly those with advanced Arabic language skills. By the late 1980s this was, belatedly, considered by the state to have been one factor behind the rapid spread of Islamist ideology in schools and universities and eventually led to a new effort to curtail Zaytuna's influence on the education system (Zeghal 2010, 117).

The influence of individual teachers could be striking. In Sousse, two teachers at the prominent Lycée de Garçons from 1962 were Zaytuna-educated shaykhs who had been highly critical of Bourguiba: Abderrahman Khelif and Taieb Ouertani. Khelif had led anti-Bourguiba demonstrations in Kairouan and his removal as imam in the city in January 1961 had sparked more protests (Kerrou 2009).[11] Salah Karkar, a future al-Nahda leader and hardliner who was born in Bodheur, near Monastir, was a pupil of theirs until taking his baccalaureate in 1968. He described their hostility to Bourguiba and their efforts to have a prayer room set aside in the school, to have the school respect timings for the Ramadan fast, and to have an imam attached to the school. 'It was in some way the core of moral identity that lay at the origin of the Tunisian Islamist movement,' Karkar said (Ayari 2009, 147). Mahmoud, a young medical student and preacher, had also been a pupil during this period at the Lycée de Garçons, and remembered Ouertani describing his experience in jail and some of the brutality he had faced. At medical school in Tunis, Mahmoud also studied alongside two of Khelif's sons. Khelif went on to become an inspector of religious and civics education, which meant he travelled through the Sahel from school to school assessing teachers, among them an activist preacher from Akouda who by then was teaching Islamic studies at a school in Enfidha, in the north of the Sousse governorate, who

[11] Khelif later became a member of the official Higher Islamic Council in 1989 and stood as a candidate for the ruling party in the April 1989 elections, heading the list for Kairouan (Frégosi 2003, 27). This was no doubt one element in a larger Ben Ali project to co-opt the religious revival and to undercut sympathy for the increasing political challenge represented by al-Nahda. Later Khelif gave Qur'anic classes on the Saudi-based Iqraa satellite television channel.

fondly remembered Khelif for his inspirational preaching. Neither Khelif nor Ouertani joined the Islamic Group in the 1970s or the MTI in the 1980s. Instead, they crossed between the realms of an official Islam and an anti-establishment Islam as '*passeurs de scènes musulmanes tunisiennes*', transferring ideas between the two (Camau and Geisser 2003, 272). From this liminal position they inspired a new generation of activists.

A similar network developed in the other main boys' school in Sousse, the Lycée Technique. There a group of boys encouraged a sympathetic teacher to invite Ghannouchi to visit for a lecture in 1977. As one of the pupils, Abdedayem Noumi, who soon joined the Islamic Group himself, remembered:

> Shaykh Ghannouchi talked about development from the basis of Islam and how the real values of Islam were liberty and science and he proved this with verses of the Qurʾan, the verses that call on us to read and to read. And many pupils came to this talk and we had small books that we handed out, especially from the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, books of Hassan al-Banna, Hudaybi, Mohamed al-Ghazali, books that talked about how to behave with others.

A number of teachers at the Lycée Technique were directly or indirectly linked to the Islamic Group. One teacher of religious education in the 1970s was Mansour Bennour, a Zaytuna-educated cleric who was the imam at the main mosque in Akouda, to the north-west of Sousse. His son went on to become a prominent activist within the movement and the head of the Akouda bureau after 2011. In 1979, another newly-qualified teacher recruited to the Lycée Technique was Nejib Khediri, a preacher from Chorbane, the village to the south of Sousse, who was a graduate of the small Faculty of Shariʿa and Theology in Tunis (the replacement to the Zaytuna mosque-university) and who would be among the first founding members of the MTI. Here then was an informal network of connections under construction, involving charismatic teachers and intellectual guides from within and without the movement. The network not only bound the nascent community together but also transmitted ideas to a new and eager generation of young pupils in Sousse. The bonds formed in this period were remarkably resilient.

Schools also provided an opportunity for pupils to begin to organise themselves and to become active. Noumi, the schoolboy at the Lycée Technique, was by the late 1970s in a group of pupils who gathered together not only in school and in the mosque, but outside as well. Again the emphasis was on self-improvement as individuals through acquiring skills and self-confidence and the forging of a new community that stood apart from contemporary Tunisian society.

> We practised sport in the morning and swam, and we did scientific and spiritual studies about the Qurʾan and hadith, and even about important personalities in the world and how they worked, people like Nelson Mandela, Indira Gandhi, Malcolm X and others. We talked about a lot of personalities, even people not from the Islamic movement, about what they give to the world in terms of values. We also joked with each other, and we did poetry, we learnt some martial arts even. It taught us how to communicate with each other and with other pupils and our families. We learnt how to behave with friends and families, how to speak to our families about Islam. (Noumi)

Others emphasised how this newly forged community offered a sanctuary to pupils boarding in school dormitories far from their family homes. Pupils from nearby villages who had been among the best students in their primary school could go on to board at a secondary school in Monastir or Sousse, spending at least two or three weeks at a stretch away from home. The pupils boarding in the dormitories were free on Sundays, allowing those who wanted to attend the *ḥalaqāt* at the Great Mosque. One of those who went on to lead the Islamic Group in the Sahel in the late 1970s, Khairi, began his activism while boarding at a secondary school in Monastir. He was one of several activists from Chorbane. For Khairi the school environment in the city was an escape from what he called the 'forgotten' and 'neglected' life in the countryside. It was here in the school dormitory that they forged a new network of belonging.

> We shared the dormitories, and we shared our food, our drink and our studies. There were many ways in which we gathered and it shaped very specific relations between us and people became for each other another father or mother or brother because of our isolation and distance from our families . . . And this was a benefit for us in calling people to prayer, to Islam, to good morals (*al-akhlāq al-ḥamīda*),

> and in reminding people of their history and glory, and so it began to spread. (Khairi)

This reflects a stark social transformation, in which a wave of literate young people found themselves newly resident in cities, struggling with the excitement and inequalities of their new environment far from the narrower experience of their villages and less well educated parents. Here began the generational 'social and cultural chasm' identified among Islamists elsewhere (Kepel 2002, 66).

The pupils of the Islamic Group insulated themselves from this cultural shock by building an alternative world. Within Khairi's school there was already an organised system in which classes could elect representatives who would lead cultural and sports activities, even running small cafes selling food and drinks to other children. At the end of the school year teachers would give out prizes to the most successful groups of pupils. From the mid-1970s at this Monastir school the religious pupils began to win the elections and to start running cooperative cafes, which proved small financial successes. They were mocked by their fellow pupils as '*khouanjiyya*', the derogatory epithet that came to be widely applied to the Tunisian Islamist movement and which suggested they were merely another branch of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. However, for the pupils themselves the experience was influential.

> Our cooperatives made profits and the headmaster appreciated what we did . . . That left an indelible impression on the pupils, that we were clever and had values and morals and belief. And that encouraged us to be a model to others and we attracted people and the group became larger and larger. What happened in Monastir was the same in Sousse and Mahdia. And we did some sports activities and we did other week-long activities, like a week of fasting, a week of praying, a week about the hijab, when we distributed headscarves, and a week of *da'wa*. Each week focused on one subject, and we distributed leaflets and small booklets. (Khairi)

The group also encouraged pupils to do well in school: they awarded each other small prizes for the pupils with the best marks, or the hardest working, or the girls who were most 'modest' (*muḥtashima*), or had the best influence in their classroom. They arranged

discussions among themselves on subjects ranging from religious belief, to history and geography. Outside term the groups held meetings or went on camping holidays together by the beach. By the time these pupils were finishing their baccalaureate exams they were already part of an organised network, which had connections on university campuses. Pupils were passed on to new contacts when they entered university so that they were immediately absorbed into the Islamist student collective and assigned responsibilities according to their past experience in school. In this respect Khairi was unusual: he was expelled from school at sixteen because he had become such a prominent Islamic Group figure (he went on to lead the Group in the Sahel in 1978-81). Rather than attend university, he left the country in 1981 to avoid a conviction for his activities, then later spent seventeen years in jail. After 2011 he was appointed to a senior administrative position within al-Nahda in Tunis.

In the 1970s most students who left schools in Sousse heading for university went to a faculty of the main Tunis University in the capital. However, as the education system gradually expanded a number of faculties were established in Sousse, eventually becoming Sousse University. The first to be established, in December 1974, was the Faculty of Medicine, which became an important centre of Islamic Group activism not just for medical students but for others who came to join in the activities on campus. One of al-Nahda's regional leaders in the Sahel after 2011, Fethi, was a medical student in Sousse in the first year that the faculty opened, when the initial intake was only around 100 students. He attended the weekly *ḥalaqāt* at the Great Mosque and took part in the religious activities that gradually began to spread within the faculty. They made claims on the faculty administration, persuading them, for example, to set aside space for a prayer room. This gave the Islamic Group activists the sense of being special and apart from their fellow

students. In 1978 the students invited Maurice Bucaille, the French Muslim doctor and author, to come to speak in the lecture theatre.

> This was important because he linked the past and the present, and especially when someone is highly cultivated, educated and Western it gives you another image, it adds another dimension to those Muslims in the country. It was like a breath of air that gave you some hope that at least you are not alone and there are other people with you, enlightened, cultivated, educated . . . We felt we were not living like ordinary people but that we held a certain idea and that we were living for it, defending it, believing in it. (Fethi)

Nor was the faculty solely a domain for male activism. Souad Ladhari entered the faculty in 1978, aged 18, and face a more confrontational experience. It was a period of student strikes and demonstrations, and a moment that had a profound impact on her as a young student. One cousin, a unionist activist, had been arrested during the UGTT demonstrations of January 1978, and was jailed and tortured to death. Ladhari and her friends were engaged in constant debates on campus between different political factions: leftists, Islamists, Communists, and Destourians—those loyal to Bourguiba's ruling party. In her first year she was one of just five female students in the faculty who decided to start wearing the hijab.

> We were really persecuted for it, eventually by the administration, but also by our colleagues who didn't share our opinion and who hit us with stones when we went to the university restaurant, and they sang songs at us to annoy us . . . but for us the hijab signified a religious conviction, no more than that and nothing else. It was a conviction dictated by the Qurʾan. It came from within our own faith. We were convinced and we are convinced that we are more respected, more protected against the vices of society, but also responding to an obligation dictated by the Qurʾan. (Ladhari)

An important influence at the time was Hind Chelbi, a young veiled philosophy lecturer who took part in a televised evening talk during Ramadan in Tunis in October 1975 which was attended by Bourguiba. In her lecture on 'Women in Islam' she criticised those Tunisian women who dressed as Westerners or 'mimicked' other societies in the way they dressed, and she insisted that choice of clothing was as vital an element of a nation as its language. She criticised the condition of Tunisian women, arguing for equal civil rights

and economic independence and dismissing those interpretations of Islam that saw it as patriarchal ("Hend Chelbi" 1975). Many women who later became members of al-Nahda spoke of her deep influence on them; Ladhari, for example, knew her personally and remained in contact with her. Chelbi was also invited to speak to the pupils at the Lycée Technique at this time (Noumi).

The strength of the Islamic Group was not just its morality-based educational programme but also this remarkable informal, local-level network that bridged different age groups and class backgrounds and which bound together this new community of faith. As the student population grew in the years ahead, so this Sousse network expanded rapidly. The deep relationships formed between these young men and women were vital in building an organisational structure and they survived into the post-2011 period.

2.4 Mosques and study cells

By the late 1970s the religious revival across Tunisia was visible and organised, both in schools and universities, and around particular mosques. The first approach of the regime was to co-opt this revivalism, in the hope it might fend off the challenge from the left and simultaneously shore up its own failing legitimacy. Bourguiba's approach to the role of religion in public life had always been more utilitarian than ideological. His secularism, such as it was, did not mean separating religious institutions from those of the state, or separating religion from politics, or indeed proposing a new relationship of tolerance between religious individuals and the state. Rather, in line with Asad's understanding of secularism as involving the state's interference in and remaking of religion (2003, 200), Bourguiba's approach represented an attempt to regulate religious affairs so as to assert the

state's control over religious symbols in order to monopolise religious activity.[12] This was adaptable to the changing climate. Whereas in the 1950s and 1960s Bourguiba had stripped Zaytuna of its independence and proposed abandoning the Ramadan fast in the name of urgent development needs, by the 1970s the regime began to embrace Islam again, now as a moral guide at a time of social and economic dislocation. The regime was inserting itself into a competition over religious symbols. It reinforced its religious rhetoric with administrative changes, adjusting working hours in the state administration to accommodate the Ramadan fast, restoring Arab-Islamic architecture, and introducing religious education in schools as a subject of its own (Frégosi 2004, 96).

This official co-option of the Islamic revival was soon visible even in Sousse. In August 1977, for example, more than 500 boys and girls took part in the city's eleventh annual competition of Qurʾanic commentary and recital in the Great Mosque, which included cash prizes, and had official endorsement: it was reported in the party newspaper and organised by the regional cultural committee of the governorate and the regional council of the Association for the Preservation of the Qurʾan ("544 Shabban" 1977). In January 1978 the governorate's regional cultural committee also arranged a screening of the Moustapha Akkad film, *The Message*, about the life of the Prophet ("Sousse: Projection du film" 1978). By 1979 the Qurʾanic recitation competition had become well established, with increasing prize money and entrants as young as twelve taking part and doing so 'not with extremism but a diligence worthy of respect', according to one semi-official newspaper (Hafsia 1979).

Regime efforts at co-option, however, did little to curb the revivalist movement in Sousse. From around the time of the 1973 police encounter in Sousse and perhaps in part

[12] I have written elsewhere in more detail about the complex nature of state secularism under Bourguiba and Ben Ali (see: McCarthy 2014).

because of it, the young preachers turned away from the Tabligh style of preaching towards the semi-structured movement which came to be the Islamic Group. The travelling and public call to Islam that the Tabligh style involved had become problematic because it was beginning to arouse the interest of the state, which feared a new political challenge (Magnuson 1991, 170). In 1972 the group had launched a magazine, *al-Maʿrifa*, for which the publishing licence was owned by Abdul Qadir Slama, a 64-year-old Zaytunian shaykh originally from Qusaybat al-Madyun, a village just south of Monastir. This magazine allowed the group to spread its ideas further and to explore the direction of its work. This moment also coincided with the first Tunisian Book Fair in 1973, which offered the young preachers new access to a wave of literature being published by Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood authors newly released from jail. Habib, the preacher who worked in a bookshop, brought many of these books back to Sousse to share with the group. The young Sousse activists of this period spoke of reading Hassan al-Banna, Sayyid Qutb (particularly his Qurʾanic commentary *In the Shade of the Qurʾan*), as well as the Pakistani Islamist Abul Ala Maududi, and the Syrian Islamist Said Hawwa. Among the leaders of the Islamic Group in Tunis, the transnational influence of the Egyptian literature in particular seemed to mark the start of an intellectual shift. As one of the co-founders, Ennaifer, said in 1985:

> It is this current which was to influence us and push us to engage more directly in political action, as well as in a certain underground formation. We began at that time to form secret groups to give them training, but always with a spiritual dimension that specified it. (Burgat 1993, 185)

Mohamed Elhachmi Hamdi, who was himself a member of the movement during this period, argues that from 1973 ‘the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood would prove to be decisive on almost all levels’ (1998, 21). However, even at this stage religious, not political, issues dominated the discussions. A quantitative survey of the articles published in *al-Maʿrifa* between 1972 and 1979 showed that out of 558 articles, 35 percent were on intellectual and cultural questions, 32 percent on doctrinal and moral questions, only 9

percent on social issues and fewer than 6 percent on politics (Hermessi 1994, 81). Of the 31 articles that were political, only four were on domestic politics and the rest were on international issues.

The most important organisational nodes were the mosques. As well as the weekly classes at the Great Mosque, there were four other mosques in central Sousse that became

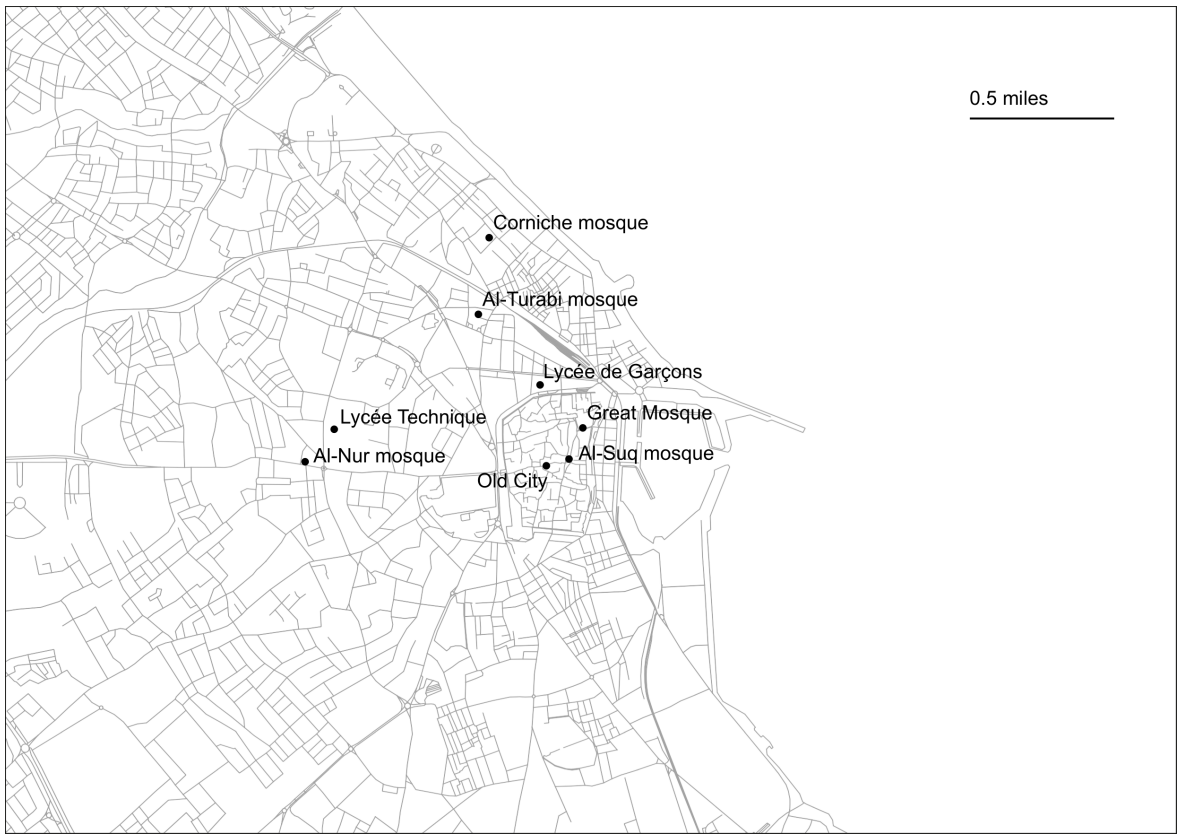


Figure 2.1: Key mosques and schools in Sousse.

important organising centres for the new movement. In each mosque there was at least one activist chosen for his charisma and religious commitment and who had a profound influence on others. Closest to the Great Mosque, and still within the Old City, was the small Jamiʿ al-Suq, where Yahya and Habib were active from the early 1970s. This was also close to the Chemli family fabric shop, which also soon became a meeting point for young activists. The other mosques were outside the Old City. One was the small Corniche

mosque (formally named Jamiʿ Umar ibn al-Khattab, but more commonly known after the district in which it was located), a small way up from the seafront just north of the Old City. The first preacher here was Abdallah, the medical student who had been present at the Great Mosque in 1973. He said of this experience:

> There were people who followed the preaching and they cried. They cried! And even today sometimes I meet people in the street who say hello, and I don't know them but they say: "I attended prayers with you in the Corniche and we cried!" Many people say that. (Abdallah)

By the late 1970s Abdallah was replaced at the Corniche mosque by Nejib Khediri, the teacher of religious and civics education at the Lycée Technique, who came from a religious family in Chorbane, which has produced other members of the movement. He studied in a religious secondary school in Kairouan, then attended the Faculty of Shariʿa and Theology in Tunis and became active within the Islamic Group from 1977. In 1979 he became the Friday imam at the Corniche mosque, meaning he had the right to lead the main weekly prayers. The third key mosque, Jamiʿ al-Turabi in Trocadero, was newly built nearby, with funding from Abdallah's family, and it was here that Abdallah went from the Corniche mosque.

> Some of the clerics were controlled by the state and were corrupted a bit. But there were mosques where there were no imams, they were abandoned and we took them. And especially in the new districts we built mosques. So here [in Trocadero] it was a new mosque, for example. The owner of the land built it, and we helped in the construction. It was extraordinary this movement of young people. We took part in the building and the owner asked me to take charge of the mosque and so I led the mosque as the imam. (Abdallah)

Another important preacher from the movement at this mosque was Mokhtar al-Mehri, a Zaytuna-educated scholar, one of whose sons later went on to be a political prisoner and then the leader of a local al-Nahda bureau in the city after the 2011 uprising. The fourth important mosque, Jamiʿ al-Nur, was in a different area, to the west of the Old City, on the main road leading to a large football stadium built in 1973 that was home to the Sousse team Étoile Sportive du Sahel. The imam at this mosque was Ali Nouir, the maths teacher

from Chorbane, who was one of the regional leaders of the Islamic Group at this time. These four mosques became important nodes of influence and activism for the movement. Similarly, in other nearby towns and villages in the Sousse region activists preached from mosques and formed their own local sections within the Islamic Group.

The mosque sessions themselves were a place in which to educate a new generation of activists in the details of religious belief and practices. Youssef, an activist from Hammam Sousse, started attending the sessions at his local mosque at the age of sixteen in 1978, and described this as a 'social incubator' (*al-ḥaḍāna al-ijtimāʿiyya*). Sympathetic clerics provided protection for these activities. In Akouda, then a village north-west of Sousse, Mansour Bennour, the Islamic studies teacher at the Lycée Technique, was the imam of the district's main mosque, where he allowed his son to lead *ḥalaqāt*. In this case, the imam acted as a 'cover' to protect the young activists, as one member of the study group described it. The mosques were also places of selection: some of those attending the mosque were then invited back to additional study sessions in the privacy of individuals' homes. Again this indicates that not all of those attracted by the religious revival were part of the distinct Islamic Group. Such a private meeting was known as a 'cell' (*khaliyya*) or a 'circle' (*dāʾira*) and gathered around eight to ten activists together. These cells, which emerged in the late 1970s, incorporated religious training but added a political and intellectual dimension derived from the Muslim Brotherhood literature that the movement's leaders were reading. As Youssef, the Hammam Sousse activist, put it:

> There were sentences from the hadith of the Prophet, and memorising of the Qurʾan, and a commitment to Islamic behaviour, and the requirements were more educational than anything. We were young, around sixteen or seventeen, and it was required to have an educational direction to internalise the values of Islam. In addition, there were some other indications—the questions of freedom in the country, of oppression, dictatorship, the one-party system. And that was the beginning of the understanding of the political framework in the country.

Others described having to memorise parts of the Qurʾan and hadith, as well as reading Islamist literature and simpler short texts with explanations of Islamic principles. One activist from M'saken, Riadh, whose father was a Zaytuna scholar and an imam in one of the city's mosques, had been brought up in a religious environment and led weekly *ḥalaqāt* for young activists himself. However, he found a new direction in the cell he attended weekly from 1979 in Sousse, where he was by now a student at the medical faculty. His reading led him to a new path that conflicted with the traditional Zaytuna education of his father.

> We were speaking another language that was different to that of Zaytuna, it was the language of Islamist writers like Sayyid Qutb, Mohamed Ghazali, Abul Ala Maududi, Yusuf Qaradawi, and then we had a wave after the Iranian revolution of writings like Baqr al-Sadr, Khomeini himself. The Shiite writings were revolutionary and they had an influence on the young people and that irritated the Zaytunians a lot. They didn't like that and even my father was a bit irritated. (Riadh)

The relationships formed in these private meetings were particularly robust. They required greater attention to the programme of study and a clearer leadership structure. They also tended to attract the better-educated followers of the movement, particularly university students who went on to become doctors, lawyers, engineers, and teachers. It was also apparent to all those taking part that what they were now doing made them a target in the eyes of the regime. Indeed, arrests followed in the early 1980s. As one activist from Akouda put it:

> Most of the individuals of these educational cells received training in belief and education, and this enabled the movement's steadfastness and fixedness. Their models were the Companions of the Prophet, and they expected trials and prison at any moment. We can say that the Islamic movement continued and was steadfast because of the secret educational cells. The public studies were in front of people and gathered the old and the new, those who were deeply-rooted in religious culture and the beginners who were weak in belief and you didn't rely on them a lot. But you did rely on the culture that was received by that person in the secret cell. (Saleh)

The national leadership in Tunis held a first meeting in August 1979 to organise a formal structure and to recast the Islamic Group as a more political organisation, the MTI, with an

organisational hierarchy that reached down from the national level to a regional leader (*ʿāmil*), with a regional bureau, district leaders, and smaller cells beneath. However, even as the discussions assumed a more structured, political form, strong religious belief remained central to this project at the local level.

Despite regime efforts at co-option, the movement became increasingly well organised, taking advantage of a relative freedom in the mosques, sometimes under the cover of sympathetic clerics, to develop poles of mobilisation. From these congregations grew the outlines of a committed Islamic movement, inspired by a new wave of literature, that would soon come to express political ambitions in parallel with its moral convictions.

Conclusion

The cumulative effect of these autobiographical accounts is to privilege the role of faith and morality. It was this rather than a cultural clash or a psycho-social upheaval which best explains what drew these young men and women together into a movement of imagined solidarity. The socio-economic context of Sousse, and Tunisia in general, in the early 1970s was indeed one of malaise, a time of social change that precipitated an array of political mobilisations across the country. However, it was a particular, often personal, sense of humiliation at the repudiation of religion in the public sphere which brought a young generation to seek sanctuary in the new morality of the preacher-led Islamic revival. Soon a remarkable informal network sprang up in schools and universities, drawing on transnational Islamist literature and reinforcing these shared values and common interests. Even as the regime grasped the religious revival underway and tried to co-opt it, the movement was becoming increasingly organised and beginning to take its activities beyond the public spaces of the mosques into the privacy of the home.

What is striking in the accounts of Sousse activists is how these ideas and networks became pillars that lasted well beyond the 1970s. This was not a passing phase on the path

to becoming a formal political party; this training and these friendships, often crossing geographical and class boundaries, retained their collective mobilising power for many decades. In the 1980s, while the movement at the elite level in Tunis adopted a distinctly political turn, the local activists in Sousse instead enacted this new morality through a vanguard community built around an imagined solidarity.

3 Rethinking Politicisation

> We always looked for a way to change the reality of the country by changing ourselves. If we change ourselves, we can change others . . . It was always in my mind that I was a representative of the movement wherever I was. It was a test of all our actions.
>
> *Hassan, a former student activist and then teacher at the Lycée Technique in Sousse, arrested in 1986 and again in 1991.*

On 6 June 1981 the Islamist leadership staged its first formal political act. At a press conference in a lawyer's office in Tunis, the group announced it intended to enter political life with the formation of the MTI. It was this turn to the political and the early embrace of pluralist politics, and soon afterwards democracy as an explicit concept, that has come to define the movement's history. Scholarly attention has focused on the visible formal contest between the MTI and the regime, as it developed through arrests and negotiations to a brief moment of political freedom in 1989 before culminating in a repressive crackdown in the early 1990s (see, for example: Burgat 1993; Shahin 1997; Hamdi 1998; Allani 2009). Burgat, for example, frames his analysis by noting that 'by the start of the 1980s the Islamists and the Bourguibists started identifying themselves as politically opposed forces on the national scene' (Burgat 1993, 183). Allani, likewise, frames his account as an analysis of 'the shifting relations between Tunisia's Islamist Movement and the Tunisian government' (Allani 2009, 257). Such studies explain how the movement tried to enter the political process in an authoritarian system. However, this chapter argues that a focus on formal politics overlooks a rich territory of activism offstage, which encompassed a range of social practices. Negotiations for entry into the formal political process were conducted through a discourse determined by the regime, but they were by no means the only arena of struggle.

My approach draws on James Scott's concept of the relationship between the public and the hidden transcript as a diagnosis of power relations (1990). For Scott, the open discourse is controlled and circumscribed by the dominant power. Dominant powers use a public transcript as a parade (sometimes literally) to demonstrate and enact their power; subordinates are then forced to conform not because of a dominant hegemonic ideology but as a performance for protection. Thus:

> Subordinate groups have typically learned, in situations short of those rare all-or-nothing struggles, to clothe their resistance and defiance in ritualisms of subordination that serve both to disguise their purposes and to provide them with a ready route of retreat that may soften the consequences of a possible failure. (Scott 1990, 96)

This might explain why some of the leaders of the MTI, and its successor al-Nahda, continued to pursue the goal of legal authorisation as a political party, publicly endorsing commitments to democracy and a civil state, despite the fact that they were facing what was effectively a one-party authoritarian system. Scott argues then that much of the struggle of subordinate groups is not conducted in public, but in more ambiguous territory. The 'hidden transcript' is specific to a given social site, reaches beyond speech to encompass other practices, and is a 'zone of constant struggle' with the dominant power (Scott 1990, 14). Resistance struggles are not fought solely over political and material resources, but are a contest over culture and ideology too. Given that the MTI/al-Nahda was engaged in a broad range of contention against the political and cultural impositions of the Bourguiba and Ben Ali regimes, Scott's approach encourages us to look within the realm of the informal and the hidden in order to uncover a more complete terrain of struggle.

Al-Nahda's own account of its historical evolution has inclined to what Scott identifies as a public transcript. The movement presented an account of itself in deference to a state-centred political system and emphasised how it adopted democratic political

goals and worked for inclusion in the political process. This was not merely a presentation for Western observers, for it also occurred in writings intended for a Tunisian and wider Arabic-speaking audience. Thus, in an interview with his party's own newspaper *al-Fajr* in 2012, Ghannouchi framed the history of al-Nahda as coming in 'important and distinctive stages', moving from a *da'wa* association in the 1970s to a political opposition party in the 1980s to a 'civil party with an Islamic reference' (al-Jamaoui 2012). Or, as he put it in another interview: 'We drank the cup of democracy in one gulp back in the 1980s while other Islamists have taken it sip by sip' ("Interview transcript: Rachid Ghannouchi" 2011). He presented the movement as seeking a role within an inclusive system, and often likened it to a stallholder wanting to sell its wares in the marketplace. To challenge Ghannouchi's presentation is not to accuse him of deceit, but rather to note that his account masks multiple alternative narratives of the movement's repertoire of contention. The plasticity of the movement's project allowed it to maximise its mobilising potential, engaging an array of interests including identity and religion as well as democratic, social, economic, and class aspirations. However, a focus on formal political discourse risks giving the false impression that the political struggle was fought for state-level political power alone. Indeed, though the first MTI press conference in June 1981 has been taken as the politicisation of the movement, a closer reading of the event suggests that formal political work was not in fact the primary goal. The movement's official transcript of the press conference states:

> For us, political work is not aimed just at obtaining a seat in parliament or among the ministers. We go deeper than that, for at this stage political work aims to provide a climate of freedom in which we can establish the roots of our main goal. Political work essentially starts from intellectual and cultural freedom. And we as an Islamist movement consider that the essential struggle is foremost a struggle in the cultural, social, and intellectual arena before the political level as generally understood. (Harakat al-Ittijah al-Islami 2012b, 19)

There were sharp debates within the movement at this point between those who wanted to seek immediate legal recognition as a political party (an approach favoured by Ghannouchi and Mourou) and those who wanted to remain a sociocultural movement (an idea favoured by Karkar) (Camau and Geisser 2003, 287). Only by a close vote did those in favour of pursuing legal authorisation as a party win out. The image of the movement as merely a political party occludes these differences and obscures the fact that it remained simultaneously political party and social movement. It aspired both to compete in elections and to forge a dissident subculture built around identity, morality, and *daʿwa*. It is within the ambiguity and tension of this duality that we uncover a more fruitful understanding of the movement's development.

This chapter looks beyond the formal political relations between the MTI and the regime to address how the movement operated at a local level when its national leadership embarked on a political project. After addressing the impact of the first repression on the movement in Sousse, this chapter excavates previously overlooked terrains of activism in two social sites: on university campuses, and as a discrete community-building project. This chapter argues that it was these activities that better defined the movement at a local level rather than the formal political negotiations and competition with the regime. These social activities began in the late 1970s, before the regime started repressing the movement, and therefore appear to have been the result of conscious choice rather than a mere response to oppression. Yet, by the mid- to late-1980s it is clear that such offstage activities offered an outlet for activism at a time when public political activities were highly constrained. Finally, the chapter addresses the moment when the public and the hidden transcripts collided in confrontation with the regime.

3.1 The first repression

A series of events encouraged the leaders of the Islamic Group to reach beyond their initial *daʿwa* project. The January 1978 protests led by the UGTT turned the Group towards the pressing social and political questions Tunisia was now facing. The student movement on university campuses, the scene of an intellectual and physical contest between the Islamic Group and the left, accelerated the new political vision. It was the Iranian revolution of January 1979, however, that offered a model of what might be achieved, as well as a new vocabulary of contention for the challenge ahead. As Ghannouchi put it:

> The most important thing the Iranian Revolution gave us was the idea of the conflict between the oppressed and the oppressors (*bayn al-mustaḍʿafīn wa-l-mustakbirīn*), and that's another translation of the conflict between the poor and the rich, the class struggle, but in an Islamic framework using Islamic terminology. (Ghannouchi 2011, 55)

Yet there was a climate of mistrust developing towards the movement, particularly after the beginning of the hostage crisis in Iran in December 1979 and the failed Libyan-sponsored uprising in Gafsa in January 1980. In February 1980 police intervened after clashes on Tunis university campuses between Islamic Group students, who opposed the Gafsa uprising, and leftist groups calling themselves Democratic Patriots, who favoured what they considered was a 'popular revolt' (Ben Dhiaf 1980, 583). Difficult economic conditions contributed to a febrile atmosphere: in 1980 unemployment stood at 11.9 percent, with more than half of those looking for work under 25, and prices rose more than 10 percent (Ben Dhiaf 1981, 591; Boughzala and Mahjob 1980, 663). In February 1981 students again held days of protests against curbs on freedom of expression on campus (Ben Dhiaf 1981, 586-588). It was Islamic Group students who the regime immediately identified as the culprits. Other incidents followed, including protests at the Club Méditerranée resort in Korba when the Israeli national anthem was played, after which 200 Islamists were arrested, and scuffles in M'saken, south of Sousse, on 11 July when a crowd

forced out a state-appointed imam from a mosque and put in place one of their own (Ben Dhiaf 1981; Rouis 2014, 18; Bellin 1995, 133). Police uncovered an archive of Islamic Group names and organisational structures in December 1980, pushing the movement to act quickly ahead of an expected crackdown.

The leaders of the new MTI announced themselves at a press conference in Tunis on 6 June 1981, only weeks after Bourguiba had promised a new opening for opposition political parties. The MTI would awaken the 'Islamic personality', reject a one-party state in favour of pluralist political competition, side with the oppressed (*al-mustaḍʿafīn*) against the oppressors (*al-mustakbirīn*), and restore the mosque as the centre of mobilisation (Harakat al-Ittijah al-Islami 2012a). The movement's programme was now formally Islamist and included a claim to establish an Islamic state in that it proposed the 'crystallization and embodiment of a contemporary image of the Islamic system of government' (*balwara wa-tajsīm al-ṣūra al-muʿāṣira li-niẓām al-ḥukm al-islāmī*), though this was always more aspirational than detailed.[13] The movement was to be self-financed, with mandatory contributions from its members, a system which continued after 2011 (Shahin 1997, 92).

There was a significant Sahel representation in the first tier of leadership. The Group had already held a secret congress in Sousse in April 1981, and among the twenty-five men and women selected weeks later as the founding core of the MTI, five were from the Sahel: Abdul Qadir Slama, then aged 73, the cleric who owned the newspaper *al-*

[13] In the early 1990s, well after al-Nahda had formally committed to operating within a civil state, Ghannouchi still advocated the establishment of an 'Islamic government' for which the supreme legislative authority was the shariʿa, from which scholars would deduce laws and regulations for judges (Ghannouchi 1993b, 55). Political power rested with the Muslim community, through a system of 'mandatory consultation'. Ghannouchi added that given that the circumstances did not favour establishing an Islamic government, it was acceptable to share power even in a secular democratic system. The important role of scholars in this proposed Islamic state indicates that even though Ghannouchi and his colleagues were autodidacts, they did envisage a role for classically trained scholars, as indeed did the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt (Scott 2012).

Maʿrifa; Ali Nouir, 33, the maths teacher and preacher from Chorbane; Zouhair Mahjoubi, 29, a professor of engineering from Beni Hassen, near Monastir; Nejib Khediri, 28, the teacher of civics at the Lycée Technique, also from Chorbane; and Habib Mokni, 26, a senior journalist at *al-Maʿrifa*, from Jemmal, near Monastir (Harakat al-Ittijah al-Islami 2012c). Other prominent Sousse figures at this point included Afifa Makhlouf, a teacher and daughter of an imam whose family came to be prominent in the movement in Sousse and who herself in 1981 was one of two women who were the first to attend a meeting of the movement's central committee. There she successfully argued against one colleague who insisted it should be an all-male gathering (Tamimi 2001, 58). Hermassi identifies more than a third of the MTI's members as coming from the Sahel and Sfax in a sociological survey of the movement in the early 1980s, which was by far the most represented region within the movement (1984, 43).

The regime response to the growing Islamist phenomenon was rapid. First, from the late 1970s onwards it endeavoured to appropriate religious symbols to co-opt the religious revival. In April 1979 Prime Minister Hedi Nouira insisted it was the ruling party that had been behind the re-awakening of Islam and the preservation of Tunisian '*Islamité*' (Belhassen and Dahmani 1979). In July 1981, a month after the MTI's first press conference, the interior ministry announced new regulations for the Ramadan fast including restricted working hours, the enforced closure of cafes and restaurants during the day, a ban on the sale of alcohol, and an encouragement to shopkeepers to prevent passers-by from drinking or eating in public during the day ("Ramadan" 1981; Ben Dhiaf 1981, 623). It was a striking reversal of Bourguiba's dismissal of the fast in the 1960s as an impediment to national development, but it was also a miscalculation. The ministry's circular was rapidly annulled after public criticism ("Debat sur la tolerance" 1981); it was clear there was a limit to the claims the state could make on religious discourse. Second, in

an effort to ease a broader sense of crisis, Bourguiba promised a new pluralist political future at a party congress in April 1981. However, any party that was to secure authorisation needed to sign up to a new National Pact, which set limits on formal political action and legitimised the Bourguiban leadership (Ben Dhiaf 1981, 597-8). Only the Tunisian Communist Party (al-Hizb al-Shuyuʿi al-Tunisi) was initially authorised, although Ahmed Mestiri's MDS was formally authorised in November 1983 together with the Arab Nationalist Popular Unity Party (Hizb al-Wahda al-Shaʿbiyya, PUP).

The most important regime response was to punish the Islamists for the intellectual challenge they presented. They were denigrated as deceitful, retrograde and as representing 'obscurantism and intolerance' and 'anarchy and intellectual terrorism' (UPI 1981; "M. Mzali aux Imams" 1981). Police began arresting MTI leaders from mid-July 1981: 107 were charged with belonging to an unauthorised association, defamation of the head of state, and spreading false information, according to a transcript of the judge's verdict (Case no. 12183 1981). The accusation of 'belonging to an unauthorized association' (*intimaʾ li-jamʿiyya ghayr murakhkhaṣ fīhā*) was one of the most common levelled against members of the MTI, and later al-Nahda, during the 1980s and 1990s. It derived from Law 59-154 of 7 November 1959 relating to associations, which, under article 30, set a punishment of up to five years for anyone taking part in any association that was not authorised by the interior ministry (Republic of Tunisia 1959). Most of the charges in the case blamed the MTI for the student violence earlier that year. The judge identified a number of the movement's pamphlets, including one entitled simply *What Happened in Tunisia in February and March 1981*, which called for a front against 'oppression and dictatorship' and against 'the traitor Bourguiba' (Case no. 12183 1981). The accused were given sentences ranging from six months to eleven years in jail, but this was merely the first in a series of trials. The senior leadership was jailed in 1981 and released in mid-1984, then

jailed again in early 1987 and released later that year, and then jailed again from late 1990 or forced into exile in the final crackdown. For much of the 1980s the movement's leaders were either in jail or in hiding from arrest. That alone suggests a focus on formal state-level political interactions might offer only a limited insight into the movement.

The immediate impact of the first court case was to remove the first generation of leaders, not just at a central level but in the regions too. Among those jailed were all five of the Sahelians who had been founders of the MTI, as well as some of the early Sousse preachers, including Abdallah, the medical student who had been present at the 1973 meeting, and Mahmoud, the preacher from Beni Hassan, who was caught in a second round of arrests targeting students in 1983. For both, this prison experience dissuaded them from further Islamist activism. After two years in jail, Abdallah was dismissed from his position as an inspector at the ministry of health and set up a small private medical clinic in central Sousse, where he still worked in 2014. He distanced himself from the MTI, uncomfortable with its new direction. Likewise, Mahmoud, spent several months in prison in 1983 but was shocked by the younger student Islamists he met:

> It was a very aggressive activism with protests and insults, and calling the regime a government of the depraved. It was an extremist, radical political discourse. After six months in prison I went back to my normal life in Tunisia and to do that of course you have to make concessions and I think al-Nahda didn't forgive me those concessions. (Mahmoud)

He went on to join the ruling party after Ben Ali's 1987 coup, in the hope of reforming it from within (Ben Younes 2012, 119). He too set up a small medical clinic in central Sousse, where he continued to work in 2014. Elsewhere in Tunisia others also turned away from the MTI, put off by the new radical tendency. As Kamel Ben Younes, a student Islamist activist from Djerba who was jailed in 1981, put it, the campaign of arrests and court cases created an ideological fault line and 'froze the contradictions' between those

proposing intellectual revision and a legalistic political project on the one hand, and a more radical, activist youth that favoured a sociocultural movement (2012, 82).

In place of the first rank leaders a new, younger generation stepped forward. At a national level the leadership of the movement was taken up by Hamadi Jebali, an engineer from Sousse born in 1949 who had spent several years as a student associated with a Tabligh movement in France and who returned to Tunisia in the autumn of 1981 (al-Turki 2014). Several other young activists were propelled into local positions of responsibility. Jaleleddine Rouis, a medical student born in 1957 who came from a religious family in M'saken, was contacted by Jebali and asked to fill the 'serious vacuum' of leadership (Rouis 2014, 20). Rouis led the MTI in the Sahel in 1981-3 as the regional leader or *ʿāmil*.

> We studied, we made plans, we discussed reports, we took decisions, we practised leading meetings, and guiding discussions. And it was really a fruitful period and the young people who took this on were from all walks of life: some who had graduated from university, some who chose to work in the Islamic field, men and women, and they took on their responsibilities with courage and self-confidence. (Rouis 2014, 21)

By 1984, Rouis said, the organisation had grown in size but was still run by the 'new youth', who were closer to the 'field leadership' led by Jebali than to the first generation of imprisoned leaders. Later that year, after Ghannouchi had been released from jail and re-elected head of the MTI, the youthful Rouis was elected onto the movement's prestigious Consultative Council and later headed the Sousse list for the 1989 elections.

The first wave of repression also targeted the movement's carefully nurtured centres of preaching. In mid-1981, at the moment of the crackdown, the movement was estimated to be operating in 300-350 mosques nationwide (Belhassen 1981). Soon, however, the regime installed its own loyal imams. For example, shortly before his arrest in mid-1981, the Lycée Technique teacher Nejib Khediri was prevented from taking to the pulpit in the Turabi mosque. In the crowd was Abdelfattah, an 18-year-old from Akouda,

who was already giving religious classes in his own local mosque, and who regularly attended Khediri's classes:

> We were in the Turabi mosque, in Sousse, and I remember when they got in the mosque they didn't let Neijb Khediri go up to the pulpit and another imam began to speak instead. People began to pray out loud and to recite from the Qurʾan to disturb him. The police entered the mosque, stopped the sermon and the older people were taken to the police van. There was another with me who was supervisor of our group of students, he was older than me, and he went into the toilets of the mosque and cut off the electricity and caused a blackout, so that when someone spoke you couldn't hear him on the loudspeaker. And as we left on a motorbike the police stopped us, they surrounded the mosque and interrogated us. That was how the first investigations began. (Abdelfattah)

The loss of the mosques pushed the movement underground, and that in turn required a reweighting of its organisational strategy to continue mobilisation beyond the previous spaces of permitted activism.

The politicisation of the movement came at a moment of acute political and economic crisis for the regime, and particularly for the elderly and increasingly infirm Bourguiba. Yet the effect of the MTI's 1981 declaration was to remove the top tier of leadership and preachers and to elevate a less experienced student generation. In repressing the movement, the regime identified the MTI as a political, cultural, and intellectual threat and excluded the Islamists from the already constrained political process. The movement's project would now be offstage, in social sites where limited activism was still possible, of which the first, and most dynamic, was the university campus.

3.2 Universities: a 'zone apart'

The university faculties in Tunis had long incubated political activism, especially among the left in the first decades since independence. By the early 1980s, population growth and economic development meant Tunisia's student population was rising significantly (it reached 34,000 nationwide in the 1982-3 academic year (Ben Dhiaf 1982, 712)) and new

faculties were established in the provinces. In Sousse the Faculty of Medicine opened in 1974, the Higher Institute of Agronomy in Chott Meriem, to the north of the city, in 1975,



Figure 3.1: Key mosques, schools, and university campuses in Sousse.

the École Normale Supérieure, which provided humanities and arts-focused teacher training, in 1982, the Faculty of Law, in Hai Riadh, in 1985, and the Faculty of Arts and Humanities, also in Hai Riadh, in 1990. For the Islamists, the new Faculty of Law, like the Faculty of Medicine in earlier years, quickly became an important pocket of activism: many al-Nahda leaders from Sousse and beyond studied law together here in the late 1980s.[14] Not only was the student population extending to sites beyond the capital, but the physical space of the university campus offered relative freedoms at a time when formal

[14] Among the prominent al-Nahda members from beyond Sousse who came to the city to study at the Faculty of Law in the late 1980s were: Habib Khedher, rapporteur for the constitution in the 2011-14 assembly; Farida Labidi, a member of al-Nahda's political bureau in 2014; Samir Dilou, a minister for human rights in 2011-14; as well as several deputies who sat in the 2011-14 assembly and the parliament elected in 2014, including Amel Ghouil, Adel Ben Attia and Dalila Babba.

politics remained tightly restricted. Although university security and the police were called in to curb confrontations between rival student groups, many former students gave detailed accounts of their freedom to hold meetings, to organise structured movements, to debate in public, and to publish their own newspapers. This is what might classically be described as a structural opportunity, in that it offered a newly-expanding environment for action. It was more than this though. The campus was a dynamic environment, which transmitted ideas and organisational mobilisation back into wider society. Ajmi Lourimi, a senior movement leader from Sousse who studied philosophy at university in Tunis from 1980, said:

> When the students got enriched with Islamic views from the founders they started making the movement inside the university and then they got inside society. This is the transition: founders to university to society. After university they went back to their cities and started talking to people and made them conscious of the movement. (Lourimi)

Indeed, many who were students at this time believed it was they who brought a political awareness into the movement. The jailing of the leadership in 1981 only accelerated this process.

The student movement took more extreme positions than the MTI leadership. The decision in 1981 to seek formal authorisation as a political party had only been made after intense internal debates: 70 percent of the movement nationwide had been in favour, but only 53 percent of their university students, because many argued legalisation would give recognition to the Bourguiba regime they so bitterly opposed (Camau and Geisser 2003, 290). Within the universities, Islamist students gradually turned away from the main student union, UGET, founded in 1952 and which, since a congress in Korba in 1971, had fallen increasingly under the influence of Bourguibist elements. In March 1985 the Islamist students established the rival Tunisian General Union of Students (al-Ittihad al-ʿAmm al-Tunisi li-l-Talaba, UGTE), which claimed 20,000 members (Bras 1985, 708). The union pressed for a formal break with the Bourguiba regime, what one former student described

as a strategy of 'popular revolution' along Iranian lines, and which put it at odds with the MTI's more cautious formal political ambition (Ben Younes 2012, 95-6). The MTI held a serious internal debate, known as the Project of Priorities (*mashruʿ al-awlawiyyat*), in 1982-86 to resolve this strategic difference and, eventually, it concluded that the movement should focus on being a peaceful, civil political movement, an approach that was favoured by the jailed or exiled leadership at the time.[15] However, the radical student element retained considerable influence.

The encounter with the left at university was physical. There were frequent clashes between Islamist and leftist students, especially the Marxist-Leninist group the Movement of Democratic Patriots (Harakat al-Wataniyyun al-Dimuqratiyyun, MOUPAD or WATAD) on campuses in the early 1980s, notably on 30 March 1982 at the Faculty of Humanities at La Manouba near Tunis, when around forty students were injured (Ben Dhiaf 1982, 687).[16] Even for those not present, this incident became a story of violence that galvanised others into action. Jamel was at the time a secondary school pupil in Sousse who attended a meeting at the mosque at the Faculty of Medicine. One Islamist student who had been hurt in the La Manouba violence described to them what had happened.

> He gave some details of the incident and all those who were present were soon crying out loud. He was so influential that if he'd said: 'Let's go to that place right now', everyone would have gone. And from that moment the MTI was prevailing everywhere. (Jamel)

Most Sousse activists downplayed the violence, or put the blame on the leftist students, even though both sides seemed equally responsible. Occasionally some were more ready to

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[15] The project was run by Ali Laarayedh, an engineer from Medenine, in southern Tunisia, who had studied at the merchant marine school in Sousse (Madrasat al-Bahriyya al-Tijariyya bi-Susa) in 1977-1980 and who had taken part in Islamist activities in Sousse and M'saken (Rouis 2014, 25). Laarayedh spent several years in jail but then served as interior minister in 2011-13 and prime minister in 2013-14.

[16] The Democratic Patriots eventually became a legal political party in 2011. Their leader, Chokri Belaïd, was assassinated in Tunis on 6 February 2013.

admit to what had happened. Sahbi, a Nahdawi law professor from Akouda, had been a student at the Faculty of Law in Tunis in the early 1980s:

> We used violence but only to defend ourselves. We were obliged to fight to defend ourselves. At the Faculty of Law, they said to us: "We will kill you. We will slit your throats", because they knew we were Islamists.

The Islamist students were not only fighting the leftists, but also pro-regime students, the Destourians as they were known, who the Islamists felt should not even be allowed student organisations.

> We said that the universities weren't part of Tunisia but that they were a zone apart. And if we caught what we called a *flic* (cop), a student loyal to the regime, we would shave his head. We cut all his hair and sometimes we wrote on his head an F for *flic*. (Sahbi)

The dynamic within the relative freedom of the campus was markedly different from the inclusive, legalistic approach of the movement leaders outside.

What is perhaps most striking among the Sousse activists is the intellectual influence of this confrontation with the left. Often Islamist students have been identified as tending to study scientific subjects and to shun critical thinking in favour of a more technical mindset. Hermassi, for example, describes Tunisian Islamists in the early 1980s as being most present in science faculties rather than teaching or humanities faculties (Hermassi 1984, 42). One major quantitative study shows engineers are highly overrepresented within violent Islamist groups, and that non-violent Islamist movements too are generally made up of graduates with scientific degrees ranging from engineering, to medicine, pharmacology, and sciences, which are considered elite because they require high scores in final-year school exams (Gambetta and Hertog 2016, 74-5). The authors explain their data through relative deprivation, in which above-average students face frustrated ambitions because of lack of job opportunities; psychological 'mindsets', including a desire to 'keep their social environment pure'; a preference for order, structure,

and certainties; and strong group identity, which is prevalent among engineers and which might also attract them to Islamism (Gambetta and Hertog 2016, 128-158).

However, the Islamists from Sousse seem to differ slightly from this pattern. Many Sousse activists were indeed doctors or engineers, in common with Islamist movements elsewhere, but many others studied non-scientific subjects including philosophy, sociology, economics, and, especially, law. After all, they were members of a movement founded not by scientists but by a philosopher (Ghannouchi), a lawyer (Mourou), and a theologian (Ennaifer). Although this thesis was not designed as a quantitative survey with a statistically representative sample, it does offer some suggestive findings. Of the 65 current or former Nahdawis interviewed, a similar number studied non-scientific subjects as studied scientific ones. The single most common degree course was law, just ahead of medicine.[17] The presence of so many law graduates likely reflects the fact that in the Tunisian context of the 1970s and 1980s a law degree was more highly regarded than elsewhere in the region and for intelligent, aspiring students was as much of an elite degree as medicine or engineering. The legal profession was also a redoubt for political activism across all parties. In later years the National Bar Association (Ordre National des Avocats) survived as one of the few places where it was still possible to act politically under the Ben Ali regime (Gobe 2010, 334). The presence of so many law students in the MTI may also reflect a particular pocket of Islamist activism that developed around individuals in the Sousse law faculty in the mid-1980s, which repeated the pattern established earlier in the medicine faculty. More broadly, the balance of scientific and non-scientific subjects studied implies this group is not as easily characterised by predictable subject-specific

[17] Of the 65 Nahdawis interviewed, I have details of university education for 61. Of those, 56 attended university, 29 studied non-scientific subjects (law, social sciences, theology, humanities, Arabic), and 25 studied scientific subjects (medicine, engineering, general sciences). Two went into teacher training, which could draw on non-scientific or scientific education. There were 13 law students and 10 medics.

'mindsets'. What the qualitative evidence from Sousse does reveal beyond the numbers is that those at university in the 1970s and 1980s, including the scientists, were highly engaged in and shaped by the intellectual debates that filled their student days.

In the accounts of the student experiences in the 1980s, many appear inquisitive and highly ambitious. Their career ambitions were not thwarted by relative deprivation but by exclusion because of their political and religious beliefs. As Youssef, a student from Hammam Sousse who studied at the elite engineering and sciences teacher-training college École Normale Supérieure de l'Enseignement Technique de Tunis, put it:

> We were products of the national state, meaning we had studied in schools after independence. We were the first product of the independent state. Ultimately, the country and our parents and our families and society were expecting that we would play a role in this country as high officials. (Youssef)

All described a constant political debate on campus, focused around weekly newspapers produced by the competing political movements and which were posted up on the walls for all to read, including Islamist papers entitled *The Political Event* (*al-Hadth al-Siyasi*) and later *The Intellectual Event* (*al-Hadth al-Fikri*) (Gsouma 2011, 21). Another activist, Abdelfattah, a sociology student from Akouda, studied at the Faculty of Humanities in Tunis (known colloquially as 9 avril, because of its location on Boulevard 9 avril 1938).[18] He stood for election to the student council in 1985-6, when the Islamists won two out of four student seats available, and he took part in preparing the student newspaper, which carried articles about the political positions of the MTI, as well as intellectual debates and discussions of student life.[19]

> We had a newspaper we put on the wall, *al-Hadth*, and the leftists had their own newspaper called *al-Haqiqa* (*The Truth*), we called it *Pravda*, even they called it

[18] The date is Martyrs' Day in Tunisia in remembrance of a nationalist protest during the French protectorate demanding political reforms, including a parliament.
[19] The student council (al-Majlis al-'Ilmi or le Conseil Scientifique) was an annually elected body in each university faculty that gathered representatives of students and teaching staff. Election results indicated the strength of rival political factions among students.

> *Pravda*! We put the paper up every Monday. We prepared it and wrote it and we took content that came to us. We had one person whose handwriting was excellent and we wrote it on a Sunday and at 6am after morning prayers we had a place where we posted it up, a place reserved for the Islamic movement. It was a competition to see who would put theirs up first. We always got up early to pray and we went straight to put it up and stayed until many students were there so that no one could tear it down. (Abdelfattah)

They organised demonstrations and public meetings and campaigned to extend student rights and to establish prayer rooms within the university buildings. They read and circulated writings by Sayyid Qutb, Hassan al-Banna, Ali Shariati, Muhammad Baqr al-Sadr, and later Malek Bennabi, the Algerian scholar.[20] Perhaps this much was to be expected. Yet the students also read leftist thinkers too, under the influence of their political opponents. As one Sousse activist, who studied maths at university in Monastir in the early 1980s, put it:

> The left was very cultivated and we took a lot from them, including their way of activism, that brought big gains to our movement . . . The polarisation meant we didn't spare any effort to cultivate ourselves. Sometimes you'd find yourself in a discussion circle and you'd feel your weakness, so the next day you'd buy a book on that issue and that's why we were so cultivated. We read everything. Not only the books of the Muslim Brotherhood, but Marxist thought too. We read it all; we devoured everything. (Rachid)

Though confrontational and often violent, the encounter with leftist students was also profoundly formative, not just shaping debating skills but broadening their intellectual resources.

Beyond the competition with the left, the intellectual context of student life offered a new form of meaning making for young Islamists. Their studies provided a way to understand the increasingly fraught confrontation with the regime and a new vocabulary in which to articulate their claim making. Take, for example, the experience of Hedi, a young

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[20] Ghannouchi in particular was strongly influenced by Bennabi (1905-1973): while in prison between 1981 and 1984 he translated a Bennabi essay on Islam and democracy, which argued that Islam inspires in man a democratic attitude and that this was demonstrated in the time of the first community of Muslims (Tamimi 2001, 63). Cavatorta and Merone argue that al-Nahda's leaders turned to Bennabi as an intellectual source when the Qutbist strand of Brotherhood thought proved too 'inflexible and inefficient' for the Tunisian movement (Cavatorta and Merone 2015, 36-7).

Islamist student in Tunis in the mid-1980s. Hedi was born into a family of farmers in Kalaa Kebira, then a semi-rural village outside Sousse, and had begun to be active with local Islamists during his final secondary school years. He did well in his baccalaureate, an achievement celebrated by his family and local community, and he began at university in early 1987, the year that was to mark the final confrontation between the MTI and the increasingly repressive Bourguiba regime. He read sociology at 9 avril and felt that despite his educational achievements he was still excluded from constructing Tunisian society, an exclusion that he felt physically as much as intellectually.

> I want to be present but you don't accept my presence. If you want to deny me I will insist completely that I exist. But you deny me absolutely. You will not let me exist as a student, or get my degree, or express a political position. So what do you want students to do? Automatically I will find myself in a state of absolute refusal whatever the authorities do. (Hedi)

That exclusion became the source of frustration, first, and then a motivation for action. Here was the intellectual work that presaged the shift towards confrontation.

> Why did some have the right to give their position and opinion and their answers and to participate and you were prevented from your own concept, or opinion, or participation? There was no going back. It was time to take a political stance. I was a student of sociology not maths or physics, not just one plus one equals two . . . It was the first time you could choose that you were going to be in opposition to the authorities, whatever the cost.

This realisation came at a time of heightened tension with the Bourguiba regime, which in 1987 began another major crackdown against the MTI, arresting much of the leadership, including Ghannouchi. Hedi took part in a series of MTI marches and demonstrations in Tunis protesting the arrests, and narrowly avoided being detained himself. His sense of intellectual exclusion soon became constitutive: it pushed him to organise avenues of resistance.

> Effectively you passed through this political stage from only staying put and discussing, to taking a position and then to applying this position. Applying the position meant to galvanise the people, to stay with them, to lead political meetings, to speak to the students, to sacrifice with the students, when you knew at any moment the police could enter the room. One of your responsibilities as a student was to live real freedom, not a fraudulent freedom.

Eventually, Hedi was arrested in January 1991 and jailed for four years. He was not allowed to complete his final year of studies and instead eventually found work in a tourism company. After the 2011 uprising he returned to lead the al-Nahda bureau in Kalaa Kebira.

Beyond the formal political sphere, the university campus in the 1980s still represented a site of relative freedom for Islamist activism that mobilised a new generation. Here physical and intellectual competition with leftist rivals was formative, shaping skills and pushing the students to explore rival intellectual traditions. The experience was also constitutive, providing a vocabulary of meanings through which to decipher the conflict with the regime and a motivation to organise a physical challenge to resist exclusion.

3.3 Building a dissident subculture

Beyond the elite-level political negotiations in the capital Tunis, the work of the movement in the Sousse region was divided between the rapidly growing student organisation and what was called *al-ʿamal al-turābī*, the more secretive grassroots work in society. In part this involved discussions about the political challenges both the movement and the country were facing, but this chapter argues it was most intensely focused on building a discrete community that soon began to function as a subculture based around pillars of identity, morality and faith. Although most research on the movement has focused on the evolution of its political strategy, it was in fact these community practices, this hidden transcript, that defined the MTI at the local level outside the university and that forged a great resilience that helped individuals survive the decades of repression under Ben Ali.

Despite the arrests of movement leaders from July 1981, the grassroots work was remarkably successful, not least because it involved small cells of the most loyal supporters. In a careful process of assimilation, they graduated from being sympathisers

(*al-mutaʿāṭifīn*) and members of what were called open families (*al-usar al-maftūha*), to becoming committed adherents (*al-multazimīn*) and members of the more secretive closed families (*al-usar al-mughlaqa*). Those who passed the training, which required meeting moral criteria for entry and securing the endorsement of two movement members, then swore an oath of loyalty (*bayʿa*) to the movement's leader or to one of his representatives. The effect was to build a structure that reached from the central leadership, down to a regional leadership in the governorates, and from there down to small cells in the districts. Rachid, the maths student who had studied at Monastir university, was encouraged in 1983 to set up cells in El-Jem, a rural area south of Sousse, where he now worked as a teacher.

> I was in charge of that region, with the sympathisers and the engaged in El-Jem and we had weekly meetings. I moved by motorbike all the time to have meetings, training, education, planning our work. It was all clandestine: we never announced a meeting. (Rachid)

The movement developed a distinct sense of its location in Tunisian society, a subjective understanding of shared common attributes. In part, it was a product of a class dynamic. The MTI was by now largely a lower middle-class movement situating itself against the political and business elite. This was reflected in the 1981 political programme, which aligned the movement with the 'oppressed' and demanded a 'fair distribution of wealth'. These young people represented what Abdelkader Zghal identified later as a 'new social periphery', resisting social marginalisation and seeking to establish their place in society (Zghal 1991, 217). In the 1980s after graduation, the young Islamists became doctors, lawyers, engineers, academics, bureaucrats, and, most often, schoolteachers.

At the core of this work was a continuation of the religious education and *daʿwa* that had shaped the movement in its first decade. Small educational cells (*khaliyya*, pl. *khalāyā*) of five or six people met in private homes where they memorised verses of the Qurʾan and hadith, and discussed commentaries on these texts, as well as addressing questions of belief and comportment. In their privacy they escaped the attention of the

police and security forces. Saleh, a graduate of the Faculty of Shariʿa and Theology in Tunis and a schoolteacher, led such cells in Akouda in the 1980s:

> It was about purifying yourself, educating people on morals and virtues and changing bad behaviour. These secret educational cells, they resisted and struggled even when many people were jailed in 1981. Most of the individuals in these educational cells received training in belief and education and that enabled their steadfastness . . . They had a vision of the future. (Saleh)

Faith, in other words, continued to play a central role in how the movement organised and how individuals embodied their membership in the movement. Such experiences stand in sharp contrast to those analyses that see the movement through a largely political lens. One account, for example, considers the MTI in 1981 a political party whose 'religious goals were sufficiently vague to appeal to popular desires for cultural authenticity and increased religiosity' (Jones 1988, 20). Another account argues that by the end of the decade the movement was no longer religious 'in any strict sense of the term' (Alexander 2000, 466). The evidence from these Sousse activists suggests that even as the MTI was becoming a political and social force, it maintained a constant religious core to its activism that survived through the 1980s and beyond.

The educational cells read texts sent from the central leadership of the movement, the most important of which was *The Intellectual Vision and the Fundamental Approach* (*al-Ruʾya al-Fikriyya wa-l-Manhaj al-Usuli*) produced in 1986 as one of the results of the Project of Priorities. The pamphlet includes long discussions on the nature of belief as central to the Islamist project, drawing on Qurʾanic verses by way of elaboration. It then sets guidelines for the relationship between revelation and reason, and allows for a contemporary, contextual interpretation of the holy texts through independent effort, *ijtihād*. Though little cited in scholarly studies of the movement, this pamphlet was still frequently referred to by activists after 2011 as a guiding document, which is further

evidence that the idea that belief should be embodied in daily life remained a central organising mechanism.

Not all activists came from religious families, or from families that were sympathetic to the new wave of Islamism. Instead, there are repeated accounts of how individual Islamists rebelled against their parents in pursuit of their new identity. One woman, Sayida, who became heavily involved in the *daʿwa* side of the movement in the early 1980s as a schoolgirl in Sousse and then a student in Tunis, admitted her views had been hard for her family to accept.

> I was convinced since the beginning from my readings that Islam was actually valid in everything, in politics and socially: I found it in all things. I was convinced that Islam had in it a universality. But frankly speaking we made many mistakes. In the 1980s we were very tough with our families. We were not lenient in our thought and in the way we imposed our ideas. (Sayida)

Another woman, Farida, described how her new sense of morality put her in conflict with her parents about how they should conduct their lives:

> We were trying to rectify morals. I started with my family. My late father, he was drinking alcohol and I told him not to. I even poured a bottle of wine down the toilet. There was no way to accept his behaviour. There is the licit and the illicit (*ḥalāl wa ḥarām*). But we were young, not like now, and in your twenties when you read something you want to apply it immediately. (Farida)

The forging of a new community often involved questioning and breaking their own family ties. New notions of correct behaviour were central to this.

As they broke with their families, the individuals of the movement worked hard to create a discrete subculture, a belonging to a distinctive bounded group built on a new ethical code. This was a community of common interests and shared values, shaped by daily practices ranging from religious study, shared social activities that shaped a particular style of behaviour, mutual practical, financial, and emotional support, and new rituals of social cohesion, particularly around marriage ceremonies. Farida, who was a teenager during the 1980s in Sousse, attended discussion circles at the Great Mosque in the Old City

and became part of a small community of Islamist women who created for themselves a new way of life, separate from their previous life at home.

> We were very thirsty for religion. We loved it and we found great goodness in it. We made a comparison between the first life we lived with our parents and then the one you lived with your girlfriends. We were meeting together in the week, and we went to weddings together, we went out together, for lunch and dinner and for sport. We joked with each other. We lacked many things but all that we did was *halāl*. Instead of going to a nightclub, for example, I went with my girlfriends and we enjoyed ourselves in a clean atmosphere (*jaww naẓīf*), an Islamic atmosphere (*jaww islāmī*). Some considered that the people of al-Nahda were only praying and practising religion. No, no, no. We had everything, we went on camps, we went swimming, I played football, I went on trips. (Farida)

Here there was a sense of cleanliness or of self-purification as a prelude to changing society as a whole, a motif that recurs frequently in accounts of this period. This ethical community was reinforced through daily community activities. Pupils and students were encouraged to play football together as much as to study the Qurʾan. One activist, Hafedh, an engineer from Kalaa Seghira, then a semi-rural village outside Sousse, described several layers of support that followed once he joined the movement from contacts at the mosque in the early 1980s. A group of activists helped him build his house, a neat single-storey building set back from the road behind a garden of fruit trees. A crowd of a dozen, including some skilled stone masons, would come every Sunday and give their work for free. He in turn would help others in their farms, or ploughing the land. Some of the connections he made surprised him: one fellow Islamist invited Hafedh to join him on an expenses-paid trip to Afghanistan to fight jihad against the Soviet army, an offer he quickly declined. Other connections were more mundane: activists gave each other emotional support, particularly on dealing with differences within the family.

> When we met we advised each other, we spoke together and we prayed together and especially in praying we showed great support to each other. If someone had a problem with his family, we would talk about it and advise each other. If you are in conflict with your father, they would say be correct with him because a father is someone sacred. Even if he doesn't pray you should deal with him correctly. (Hafedh)

Other work included marking the commemoration of the Eid holidays, collecting used schoolbooks and used clothes for poorer families, gathering donations in money, olive oil, or wheat from local activists and sharing it with the poor, and arranging marriages within the Islamist community. This intermarriage between Islamist families was another way of binding together the community. Individuals searched for like-minded spouses. In 1981 Habib, one of the early Sousse preachers, married a young woman from Sousse who had worn the veil for two years. 'You looked for a woman who wore the veil, even though there were few at the time', Habib said. Likewise, Saleh, the preacher from Akouda, married the daughter of Mansour Bennour, the Lycée Technique teacher and imam at the main Akouda mosque. Marriages linked prominent Islamist families in Sousse, including the Chemli and Makhlouf families, and the Gsouma and Nouir families. 'We married each other. We were a small society of our own', said Khairi.

In search of social cohesion, this new community reinvented local traditions. Perhaps the clearest example of this was with the reimagining of wedding ceremonies: costs were reduced, friends in the community made contributions, alcohol and gender-mixing were avoided, and new musical groups sang religiously-inspired songs, avoiding the loud pipes and drums normally associated with Tunisian weddings. Hafedh, the engineer from Kalaa Seghira, was married in one of these new ceremonies, which he called an 'Islamic wedding' (*zawāj islāmī*).

> Q: What was the difference between an ordinary wedding and an 'Islamic wedding'?
>
> We did Islamic weddings, meaning there wasn't any dancing, or drums, or mixing of genders and we spent only the minimum amount of money, we didn't waste money. And the sisters were really understanding: there was no need for gold. In the weddings the women were together and the men were together with no mixing. We have a tradition here that the groom goes to the cafe, which is the emblem of manhood. But we didn't go to the cafe, we went to the mosque and prayed in the mosque, and we did the contract of marriage in the mosque not at the local administration.
>
> Q: Why was that important?

> We did it in the mosque because there is humility (*khushūʿ*) before God and there wasn't any disturbance. Everyone listened to each other, there wasn't any mixing, and there was a kind of mercy in that. And perhaps this represented a good sign for the future . . . And these marriages were a great event. It wasn't the norm. How was it possible for someone to marry without drums and pipes? But we considered these to be an innovation (*bidaʿ*) because it was not part of Islamic tradition . . . People married in order have new children, a new generation, a correct generation, to serve their religion and nation. (Hafedh)

This new symbolic practice evolved over several years. It marked a new collective action, a way to separate themselves by their behaviour and an effort to challenge established norms in the public sphere. Accompanying the new wedding was a new style of music, with religiously-inspired songs (*nashīd*, pl. *nashāʾid*). One Sousse activist, who started singing in the city aged 18 in 1984, described his songs as offering 'a cultural alternative' (*badīl thaqāfi*) (Douik). His group sang at weddings and at private family celebrations, and occasionally sang songs critical of the authorities. They drew on songs from an earlier generation of religious singers in Tunisia but also from cassettes of singers in Egypt, Syria and Iraq, and they used just drums like the *bandīr*, a handheld frame drum with a snare, rather than the violins and pipes found at ordinary weddings of the time. Others who sang in such groups described *nashāʾid* that referred not just to Islam but also to issues like Palestine, or the meaning of jihad, and theatrical sketches to accompany the songs (Abdelhamid). The invented traditions served not only to inculcate a set of norms and values through ritualisation of the wedding ceremony or the *nashāʾid*, but also to create an alternative way of being modern. The new traditions established a continuity with a past that was conceived of as more Islamic and moral than modern-day Tunisia, even though this was more imaginary than real. This is what Eric Hobsbawm identified as the peculiarity of invented traditions, namely the 'largely factitious' continuity with the past (Hobsbawm 1983, 2). In the case of the MTI, these invented traditions helped to establish social cohesion and to reinforce a particular value system within the new community.

The forging of this dissident subculture was what Nira Yuval-Davis identifies elsewhere as a 'politics of belonging' (2006), with a selective narrative of the movement's self-identification reproduced from generation to generation, a strong component of emotional attachment, and an important ethical element, which members of the movement drew on to find their place in the world and to define their political struggle. Collective identity could not be understood outside a whole set of social practices, from studying, to sports, to music, to social occasions like weddings. This produced close bonds within the Islamist community, dense networks that were inward looking and effective in mobilising a social solidarity. These bonds proved remarkably resilient through the years that followed and also contributed to the identity-driven political debates that so shaped the political environment in the wake of the 2011 uprising. It was less an attempt to create a utopia on earth, than an effort to forge a particular community with a set of behaviours that remedied what activists perceived to be a spiritual vacuum in society. The community was in competition with the political and business elite, which was so closely tied to the post-colonial state. The morality-focused community represented a political mobilisation within the limits of a circumscribed political sphere and offered an implicit critique of the morality of the rest of society. It contested existing social norms. However, this construction of identity was exclusive, in that it drew the movement away from forming connections with political allies. The resulting isolation was a failing that al-Nahda itself later admitted: when the movement was confronted by a repressive regime it had no allies to whom it could turn.

The grassroots work began with small cells of committed followers, then used social practices of religious studies and reimagined traditions to forge a discrete dissident subculture. At its heart lay a sense of identity, a new moral code, and particularly the draw of faith that built a collective identity for a cohesive community. These often unnoticed

and largely offstage activities were what most characterised mobilisation within the MTI/al-Nahda in the 1980s at the local level in Sousse. They built dense networks of social solidarity that proved resilient in the years of repression that were to follow and they allowed these individuals to articulate their own sense of what it meant to be Islamist.

3.4 Confrontation

In Scott's analysis of power relations through public and hidden transcripts, he argues that when the cordon dividing the two is ruptured the most explosive realm of politics is produced (1990, 19). He identifies, in particular, the power of the excitement, energy and charisma that both impels and is generated by such events, a power that is not adequately captured by structural or organisational explanations for social movement mobilisation (Scott 1990, 203). Taking this approach, we can identify two major moments of rupture in the 1980s for MTI activists in Sousse. At these points, the movement's political activism was no longer confined to formal political negotiations in the capital, which had restricted itself to a restrained language of political inclusion, or to offstage sites of local mobilisation in universities or the private subculture community. Although Scott admits the difficulty of explaining how an initial act of defiance may turn into an 'avalanche' (1990, 220), the process seems reasonably transparent in the case of the Tunisian Islamists. Driven first by anger at a wave of repression in 1987, and then a second time by a misperception of new political opportunities in 1989 and frustration at the regime's disregard of election results, mass mobilisation irrupted into the public space, with a confrontational public discourse and protests.

The demonstrations of 1987 were a sharp reaction to a new wave of repression by the Bourguiba regime. Ghannouchi had been freed from jail in mid-1984, and then made a series of announcements formally endorsing democracy and dropping previous criticism of

the Personal Status Code, both designed to allay fears about Islamist ambitions.[21] However, even as the MTI's confidence grew, the regime turned against the Islamists once again. In early 1987 another round of student clashes on campuses in Tunis was blamed on the Islamists, who were identified by the state and the official media as 'propagandists revealing their extremist theories and their obscurantist doctrines' ("Bourguiba : Il est inadmissible" 1987, 4). On 9 March Ghannouchi was arrested, along with other MTI leaders in the days afterwards. In response, the movement held a series of demonstrations in Tunis, often violently repressed by police, culminating in a 16 July 'resistance march' in the capital (Larif-Béatrix 1987, 649). Up to eighty MTI demonstrations like this were held across the country in 1987 (Hermassi 1991, 195).

An important demonstration was organised in Sousse in May, a rare entry onto the public stage for a movement which until now had largely operated in the informal margins of life in the provinces. Walid, who was a medical student in Sousse at the time and who later joined the movement's Consultative Council, recalled:

> After the arrest of the shaykh [Ghannouchi], the picture became clearer and we saw that Bourguiba was moving to eliminate and delete the movement. We decided not to remain spectators but to react, meaning to pressure Bourguiba in the street. We wanted to let the people know who we were so that the day they targeted us they couldn't say that we were unknown to the people. And we wanted to reveal that his policy was not just to isolate the movement but to eliminate it. (Walid)

The movement delivered pamphlets to homes across the city. They wrote graffiti on the walls, with jarring slogans, such as: 'There is no God but God and Bourguiba is the enemy of God', according to Bechir, a young activist involved at the time. The challenge was partly to confront the authorities, but also to give the local population the sense that the

[21] For example, in late 1984 the movement formally announced it was in favour of democracy (Burgat 1993, 196) and in July 1988 Ghannouchi endorsed the Personal Status Code (al-Furati 1988), a progressive set of family laws introduced by Bourguiba in August 1956 banning polygamy, ending the male right of repudiation, and giving women the right to divorce and to approve arranged marriages.

movement was larger than the official regime and media discourse would ever admit. The MTI staged the march in downtown Sousse, one of the most public locations they could find, in a large square between the entrance to the Old City and the port, where buses gathered to take passengers out to the suburbs but also not far from the regional police station. There was a particular excitement at such audacity. Walid said: 'We challenged them. We came to their house and in the middle of town and we did it!'. The march began at 1pm, when the crowds were largest with pupils leaving schools and workers leaving their offices for lunch. The activists dispersed themselves around the square and came together on cue. Jamel, another medical student who was present, remembered:

> We were scattered here and there in a perimeter of 200-300 square metres and suddenly someone emerged and said: '*Allāhu Akbar!*' and that was the sign announcing the start, and everyone who heard the call gathered, and we shouted slogans and we walked for a few hundred metres before we were met by the police.

The confrontation was violent: police opened fire on the demonstrators, injuring two before the march was broken up. Dozens were arrested and jailed, not to be freed until well after Ben Ali's November coup that year. For those in Sousse, however, this march marked one of the first times they had organised in public in the city centre, well beyond the university campuses or the secretive grassroots work done in individual homes.

If the demonstrations were energising, the eventual result had the opposite effect. The regime demonised the movement as the agent of a foreign power. Reports in the official Tunisian media detailed a 'Khomeinist network' which plotted to use violence to establish an 'obscurantist state' ("Le reseau Khomeinyst" 1987). Diplomatic relations with Tehran were broken on 26 March. Around 3,000 MTI activists were arrested nationwide between March and August 1987, including for the first time many from the lower ranks (Hermassi 1991, 195). In turn, Islamist activism grew increasingly radical. In August 1987 some on the outer fringes of the movement took part in bomb attacks against four hotels in

Sousse and Monastir, injuring 13 tourists, an act publicly repudiated by the movement leadership ("Tunisie : le procès des islamistes" 1987). As it became clear Bourguiba wanted the death penalty for the MTI leaders now on trial, the language of the movement grew increasingly strident. Jebali, now acting as a spokesman in exile, warned in a formal statement:

> We will not stand with our arms crossed before this plan of extermination . . . If the authorities go beyond the point of no return, our movement, in a position of legitimate national defence, will react against tyranny. ("Tunisie : le procès des intégristes" 1987)

More hard-line elements were preparing an ambitious but unrealised overthrow of the Bourguiban regime, apparently with the knowledge of the movement leadership (Burgat 1993, 224-8; Camau and Geisser 2003, 292). In reality, however, the movement was defeated. The dozens of Sousse activists arrested in mid-1987 described months of detention and brutality at the hands of the police and their jailers. Walid, the medical student who had been present at the Sousse demonstration that year, was tortured in the Bouchoucha prison in Tunis.

> Those centres of interrogation were very tough, without any control. Whoever was held there in that centre of detention, they could do anything to him. My family didn't know where I was and even my friends didn't know. Your family would go from police station to police station to ask for you but they would not tell them if you were there. They were hard days: heavy torture, many incitements. I went through it all. (Walid)

Ben Ali's coup in November brought temporary respite. In an effort to shore up his legitimacy, the new president aligned himself with Tunisia's 'Arab-Islamic identity' and freed hundreds of MTI prisoners. Many others, including Jebali, returned from exile. The movement's leadership embraced the promise of change and declared the coup 'a divine act meant to save the country' (Hermassi 1991, 198).

If the 1987 march was a rare demonstration of the MTI's street power, the elections two years later offered a moment of semi-legitimacy in which to demonstrate the reach of its organisational structure. The regime signalled what seemed a promising new political

opening, and in turn the MTI signalled back a willingness to participate on Ben Ali's terms. The opening began with a new political parties law in April 1988 (Republic of Tunisia 1988) and then, in November, a National Pact (*al-mīthāq al-waṭanī*) promising pluralist, democratic politics in return for an endorsement of Ben Ali's coup ("Proclamation du Pacte Nationale" 1988).[22] Most opposition parties signed, including one MTI representative, the lawyer Noureddine Bhiri. The MTI renamed itself the al-Nahda movement in December 1988, to comply with the new party law, and formally applied for authorisation on 7 February 1989, just too late to require a response before the coming 2 April elections but early enough to signal their desire to take part (Zartman 1991a, 22). When the regime proposed that the opposition parties who were signatories to the National Pact should run as a united front, al-Nahda and others agreed. It was only the opposition of Ahmed Mestiri of the MDS, who believed his party could win alone, that prevented the formation of a common list (Zartman 1991a, 23). Eventually, al-Nahda was allowed to run candidates in the election, but only as independents, under lists identified by the colour purple. This was the latest product of the Islamists' compromise in pursuit of inclusion in the process. However, the al-Nahda leadership misread the situation. Though Ben Ali's rhetoric sounded new, in fact he changed little of substance in those initial years and did not begin far-reaching democratic reforms. Unlike similar political openings shortly afterwards in Algeria, Jordan, and then Morocco, the regime never authorised the formation of an Islamist political party: on 6 June 1989, two months after the elections, al-Nahda's application for legalisation was rejected. Elsewhere, Kurzman has argued that structural opportunities do not always align with perceived opportunities (1996). Likewise,

[22] Several opposition parties were formally authorised including the Progressive Socialist Rally (RSP) of Nejib Chebbi (which later became the Progressive Democratic Party and then the Republican Party); the Social Party for Progress (PSP) of Mounir Beji (which later became the Social Liberal Party); and the Arab nationalist Unionist Democratic Union (UDU) of Abderrahmane Tlili.

in Tunisia in 1989 what mattered was not what structural opportunities had or had not opened up, but rather how al-Nahda perceived its opportunities. They perceived them too optimistically.

In Sousse, as elsewhere, it was not the movement's regional leaders who were chosen as election candidates. In part, this was because many of the most senior figures had been convicted in 1987 and were not eligible to stand as candidates. It was also a strategy to put forward those on the periphery of the movement who might attract broader electoral support. Observers at the time noted that in some constituencies the movement presented clerics with links to Zaytuna, in others lawyers and businessmen with a more 'liberal' Islamic discourse, and in others activists with a more 'radical' political vision (Soudan 1989). Of the seven Sousse candidates, only the head of the list, Jaleleddine Rouis, was a true insider: by then the doctor from M'saken was a Consultative Council member and had only narrowly avoided arrest in 1987 by going into hiding for several months. His fellow candidates were respectable local figures who were movement sympathisers, not full members: Mustapha Ben Moussa, a pharmacist also from M'saken; Tarak Mokni, a university English teacher and whose relative Habib Mokni had been among the founders of the MTI; Hedhili Ben Ameur, a teacher from Kalaa Kebira; Mustapha Bouhelal, a teacher from M'saken; Saleh Hachem, a human rights activist who had been one of the early preachers in Sousse but who had distanced himself from the movement; and Zine el Abidine Attia, a legal clerk from a family of local officials in Enfidha.

The election campaign was vigorous and confident. Al-Nahda held dozens of well-attended public meetings, and distributed pamphlets outlining its political vision, which centred on a rallying cry to revive Tunisia's Arab-Islamic identity (Hermassi 1995, 115). Abdelfattah, a young activist who helped organise the campaign in Akouda, described

frequent tussles with officials from the ruling party, the now renamed Democratic Constitutional Rally (al-Tajammuʿ al-Dusturi al-Dimuqrati, RCD), during which the Islamists acted with an excited defiance. The day before the Sunday vote was supposed to be a day without campaigning, but RCD officials drove through the suburb in taxis rallying support. Hamid Karoui, the Sousse-born justice minister and head of the RCD list in the city, visited the local market.

> He was passing through the market and we surrounded them all and started whooping like Apache Indians and we threw purple-coloured pieces of paper at them and shouted: "Down with the Destour! Down with the torturer of the people!". (Abdelfattah)

However, although al-Nahda perceived itself as acting in the interest of the nation, not merely the party, in pressing for democratic freedoms, in fact the movement was entirely isolated on the political field. Political activists from other opposition parties in Sousse at the time felt the dominance of al-Nahda, particularly in the universities, but also felt their arrogance and reluctance to ally in broader alliances with leftist movements. The unauthorised Tunisian Workers' Communist Party (Hizb al-ʿUmal al-Shuyuʿi al-Tunisi, PCOT) had refused to sign the National Pact and considered al-Nahda to be as much of a threat as the regime. As one PCOT activist remembered: 'We had a slogan at the time: 'Political Freedom! No Destourians! No Khouanjiyya!' (*Ḥurriyya Siyāsiyya! Lā Dsātira! Lā Khouanjiyya!*). They were theocratic and ideological and they remained our enemies' (Labidi).

Although there was strong evidence of falsification of the results, the official count still attributed remarkable strength in depth to the al-Nahda movement. In Sousse, the list won around 27 percent of the vote—more than four times as much as the combined results of the two other opposition parties in the constituency, Mestiri's MDS and the pan-Arab PUP ("Tous les résultats" 1989). In other cities, like Tunis, Bizerte, and Monastir, al-Nahda also performed surprisingly well, a result some at the time put down to large social

and cultural fractures in society, the 'shock of modernity' brought by mass tourism to coastal areas, and a lower propensity for pro-RCD clientalist voting (Soudan 1989, 37). In Sousse, the RCD won around 70 percent of the vote, and Karoui was rewarded with promotion to the post of prime minister in September 1989. Al-Nahda election observers posted at voting booths across the country reported an even better result for the Islamists. Regardless of al-Nahda's strong performance as by far the largest opposition party nationwide with a formal tally of 14.5 percent, the final results gave all 141 seats in the parliament to the RCD ("Le scrutin" 1989).

Al-Nahda's frustration eventually pushed it into another rupture, this time even larger than the 1987 protests. Within months of the elections, Ben Ali painted the Islamists, as Bourguiba had done, as a critical threat to Tunisia. It was only the state that should act as the 'defender' of religion, he said. 'That is why we say to those who mix religion and politics that there is no place for a religious party' ("Ben Ali s'adresse" 1989). Al-Nahda's response began with statements of protest at the election results and then moved to criticism of the newly-appointed education minister, Mohamed Charfi, who it accused of launching new policies against Islam as part of a campaign against the Islamists known as 'draining the springs' (*tajfīf al-manābiʿ*) (Beau and Tuquoi 2011, 70). In November 1990, Ali Laarayedh, the al-Nahda spokesman, warned protests would follow:

> We must continue the struggle because there are no longer any ways to reach agreement with the authorities. Through demonstrations in the street, we will struggle for our rights and our country's rights. (Marouki 1990, 33)

Once the regime began arresting al-Nahda's leadership from December 1990, the movement's response intensified, with protests calling for the 'imposition of freedoms' (*farḍ al-ḥurriyyāt*) and coinciding with large-scale demonstrations opposing the US-led Gulf War against Iraq. As in 1987 the arrest of several al-Nahda leaders was the trigger for demonstrations in Tunis and in the regions. These demonstrations, as an act of resistance,

were therefore shaped by the nature of the repression the movement encountered, in this case another wave of sweeping arrests perceived as illegitimate.

There were, however, real divisions within the movement, not least over the appropriate stance to take on Iraq. Ghannouchi took a staunch line in favour of Saddam Hussein and explicitly critical of the Saudis, while Hamadi Jebali, the prominent Sousse leader and then editor of the movement's newspaper *al-Fajr*, was much more critical of Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, which he said would open the region up to American control (Daoud 1989, 790). There was also the decisive question of how confrontational al-Nahda ought to be in response to the disappointment of the elections. As Sahbi, the activist and law student from Akouda who had been imprisoned for student activities in 1983, put it:

> Some said it was a trial (*ibtilāʾ*) and that we should be patient and that there was a price to pay, and that sacrifices were needed, and even if we were killed we would be considered martyrs. We should put our lives in God's hands. The second view was for confrontation: we were going to be hit by the regime so let us die standing up. We are not cowards. We should attack so that they will understand the movement has its own existence, its own base, and many people who will defend it. (Sahbi)

The movement, which was by now struggling to maintain a coherent leadership structure, rushed into confrontation even though many were opposed.[23] This meant increased numbers of protests, particularly at police stations after the arrest of fellow al-Nahda activists and on university campuses. Most notable was a rare act of violence at an RCD office in Bab Souika, in Tunis, in February 1991, in which a night guard was killed. The decision to issue strident public statements and to press for intense confrontation, succumbing to what Hermassi called 'the malady of impatience and haste' (1995, 121),

[23] It is striking how frequently leadership of the movement was passed from one senior figure to another as the repression intensified in this period, mirroring similar leadership adjustments during earlier repressions in 1981 and 1987. Between August 1987 and November 1991, there were eleven different leaders of the movement (Harakat al-Nahda n.d.-a).

would be much debated and regretted in the years ahead.[24] Again, it was less about the shift in structural opportunities, but rather the movement leadership's perception of those opportunities. It was a distinct misreading of the movement's strengths and of the real latitude for change. In Sousse there were a number of demonstrations, including one major rally between the Old City and the port in January 1991, against both the Ben Ali regime and the US-led Gulf War. There were also confrontations between Islamist students and the police, particularly on the main road in Hai Riadh leading to the football stadium, which would also become a site of confrontation during the 2011 uprising. By mid-1991, hundreds of al-Nahda activists from across Sousse had been arrested. At least one died: Abdelwahed Abdelli, a fourth year student at the École Normale Supérieure teacher-training college in Sousse, was shot in the leg, arrested, and tortured in jail before his death on 30 June (Amnesty International 1992b, 18).

In both the 1987 demonstration and the aftermath of the 1989 elections, local-level activists within the MTI/al-Nahda emerged from their discrete sites of activity in university campuses and in morality-focused community building projects and they broke explosively into the public sphere. In both cases, the ultimate trigger for action was anger at their exclusion, either through arrests or through ignored election results, and in both cases the penalty for their highly visible transgression in the public sphere was punitive: sweeping arrests and prison sentences. By the early 1990s, the movement had been entirely dismantled, its leaders forced into exile, and thousands of its members jailed. These moments of irruption generated extraordinary acts of public defiance and heightened self-confidence, pushing the movement into decisions it would later come to regret and eventually into a conflict it could not win.

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[24] Abdelbaki Hermassi, the Tunisian scholar quoted here, joined Ben Ali's government as culture minister from 1996 and was appointed foreign minister in 2004-5.

Conclusion

The act of privileging the experiences of local level Islamist activists in Sousse in the 1980s offers a new conception of what the MTI's politicisation actually involved. Although most attention has focused on the formal political negotiations between the movement's leaders and the regime, and the clear efforts by Ghannouchi and his colleagues to find acceptance within the political process, in reality a different activism was taking place offstage. Here on university campuses young Islamists were shaping their ideas in competition with the left and coming to new understandings of their dispute with the regime. They were less keen than their leaders on seeking formal political inclusion. Beyond the university, grassroots work built on small cells of committed adherents moulded a subculture community forged around new wedding and musical traditions and centred on identity, morality, and the continued practice of faith. These may be considered as representing Scott's binary public and hidden transcripts, and it is only by excavating the informal, hidden transcript offstage that we may understand how the members of the MTI/al-Nahda understood their own identity as Islamists in this period. When the cordon was breached between the careful public discourse of negotiation and the hidden mobilising activities of the movement's base, the result was a series of sharp confrontations which led eventually to overreach on the part of al-Nahda and severe repression.

The final portrait is of a movement divided between the state-level political ambitions of its leaders, students engaged in daily confrontations, and a grassroots subculture more focused on practices of identity, morality, and faith. This complexity, which is only ever hinted at in accounts of formal relations between the movement leaders and the regime, remained central to the movement's self-understanding just as its plasticity offered a broad range of mechanisms of mobilisation. The bonds forged in the subculture

provided the resilience needed to survive the next two decades of repression and to rebuild after 2011. However, the tension between the different understandings of what it meant to be Islamist, either competing for power in a pluralist political system or Islamising from below through a moral community, remained unresolved. This ambiguity would be much debated during the years of prison in the 1990s and returned as a fundamental question after 2011.

4 The Prison Experience

> We considered prison to be a miniature version of the regime. We saw *le pouvoir* there; we saw how they were. It was the same logic as if the prison was the whole of Tunisia, the way they managed our lives in terms of our rights. The governor, the officers, they were all part of the system . . . It was a whole, implacable logic.
>
> *Hamadi Jebali, senior al-Nahda leader from Sousse, imprisoned from 1989 to 2006, including ten years in solitary confinement*.

The experience of the prison years under Ben Ali was deeply traumatising for al-Nahda, collectively and as individuals. Many referred to the period as the tribulation (*al-miḥna*), reviving the name used by the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood to describe its repression under Gamal Abdel Nasser. Yet the coercive intent of the Tunisian authorities was to deny the Nahdawi prisoners the chance to regroup, debate, and rethink their ideas as their Egyptian predecessors had done in the 1950s-60s, or indeed as had, more recently, Palestinians in Israeli jails or Republican prisoners in the H-Blocks of Northern Ireland. The Tunisian regime initially appeared successful, relying on a moderate, tolerant discourse to disguise repressive techniques. In public, Ben Ali's government spoke of a constant journey of political reform, the revival of a tradition of 'tolerant' Tunisian Islam, the defence of women's rights, and model economic growth. In private, in prison cells nationwide, it deprived, humiliated, isolated, tortured, and sometimes killed Islamist prisoners in order to force al-Nahda into submission. This chapter repositions Nahdawi experiences of the prison years of the 1990s to demonstrate the effect of practices of coercion on individuals and to reveal the self-critical debate that did eventually emerge despite the punitive regime. Accounts from the prisoners themselves reveal techniques of resilience and the eventual reclaiming of the prison cell as a site of struggle against repression, reinforced by familial support from outside the prison gates.

The Tunisian regime imprisoned the Islamists at a moment when other governments were reluctant to jail political prisoners because of the reputational cost incurred. Prison had become, in the words of one human rights activist, an 'anachronistic mode of repression' of political dissidents (Neier 1995, 424). Authoritarian regimes now deployed other modes of discipline, from the more brutal death squads of Latin America to more subtle internal controls on employment, education and travel, which were much harder to monitor and so to criticise.[25] Even in authoritarian Syria, thousands of political prisoners were released in the 1990s because jail had become too politically costly (Haugbolle 2008, 264-5). However, in Tunisia, with its long history of jailing leftist political dissidents in the 1960s-70s and Islamists in the 1980s, we should consider the continued reliance on carceral repression into the 1990s and beyond as one element in a broader reproduction of a system of discipline and surveillance which in turn was part of the making of centralised state power identified across the region (Khalili and Schwedler 2010, 1). Thus, although Ben Ali had begun his career in the military, it was through the internal security forces that he gained influence: he was made director-general of National Security, the highest position in internal security, in 1977 and again in 1984. Once president, he unleashed the 'security beast', dramatically expanding the repressive apparatus of state (Murphy 1999, 193). The number of police in the 1990s reached between 80,000 and 150,000, between two and four times its size in the mid-1980s (Henry 2007, 301-2), while the interior ministry budget grew to be half as large again as the defence ministry budget by 2010 (Lutterbeck 2015, 815). The network of 26 Tunisian prisons served as another arm of this securitised state, such that by 2005 Tunisia could

[25] That trend of course changed after 2001, when Western governments began new unlawful methods of detention and torture, which in turn encouraged countries elsewhere to return to the incarceration of political dissidents.

boast of the highest prison population rate in the Middle East, with 252 prisoners per 100,000 citizens (Walmsley 2005).

Though the system was undeniably repressive, the regime insisted on cloaking its workings in pseudo-legitimacy. Within weeks of his coup, Ben Ali abolished the much-criticised State Security Court and reduced to a maximum of ten days the time a suspect could be detained before seeing a judge.[26] In June 1991, well before the key military trials began, Ben Ali appointed a special presidential adviser on human rights and set up a commission of inquiry to examine claims of human rights violations by his security forces, which admitted 'some abuses' but insisted these were 'individual and isolated acts' and contrary to government policy (Amnesty International 1992b, 3). Ben Ali's own framing of the confrontation with al-Nahda is revealing. In an interview with *al-Hayat* in 1993, he described the Islamists as not just 'terrorists and criminals' but said:

> They excluded themselves. They were rejected by all components of society, a society attached to its authenticity and values of tolerance and openness, from the moment that they proved to be no more than apostles of sedition and terrorism. As for us, we had no other choice but to confront them, by applying the law and yet without resorting to exceptional laws. (Sraieb 1993, 621)

With this othering, he framed his opponents as not merely law breakers but as located outside the state-defined norms of Tunisian society.

The repression of al-Nahda began with waves of arrests from autumn 1990, after violent demonstrations on university campuses, and culminated in two simultaneous show trials of 279 suspects at military courts in Tunis in July-August 1992. It was the third regime strike against the Islamist movement, following the trials of 1981 and 1987 under Bourguiba, and yet al-Nahda, by now a highly structured and organised movement, seemed

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[26] Law 87-79 of 29 December 1987 abolished the State Security Court, which since it was established in 1968 had conducted several political trials that were widely seen as unfair (Republic of Tunisia 1987b). Law 87-70 of 26 November 1987 reduced the period of detention to four days, renewable to a maximum of ten days, and established an arrest register and allowed medical visits (Republic of Tunisia 1987a).

largely unprepared. Many thousands of Nahdawis were caught but, despite their earlier experiences, they had not been given any intellectual or organisational preparation for the prison experience, in contrast, say, to Palestinians, who produced written pamphlets advising future detainees what to expect in jail and how to resist interrogation (Nashif 2008, 203). Amnesty International estimated 8,000 Tunisians were arrested between September 1990 and March 1992 alone, while others within the movement claimed 30,000 were finally held in total, of whom around 10,000 spent a significant time in prison (Amnesty International 1992b, 8; Jebali). Only a very small number escaped by going into hiding, while a few hundred left the country early enough to head into exile, most notably, and to the still-whispered chagrin of some, their leader Ghannouchi, who left in May 1989 for Algeria and then Britain.[27] Judges at the heavily-guarded Bouchoucha and Bab Saadoun military courts delivered life sentences to 46 al-Nahda leaders and jail sentences of up to 24 years to 219 others, in what international human rights groups said were 'unfair' hearings that followed 'pervasive' torture during interrogation (Human Rights Watch 1992; Amnesty International 1992a). The central charges were attempting to overthrow the government to install an Islamic state and attempting to assassinate Ben Ali by firing a Stinger missile at the presidential plane. Since the trials were held in military courts there was no appeal, merely a confirmation of all the verdicts by the Court of Cassation in September 1992.

This chapter asks what happened to the movement in the wake of this crackdown, and how Sousse members of the movement experienced repression. The focus is on those Nahdawis who remained in Tunisia during the 1990s and 2000s, rather than those who went into exile because the vast majority of informants for this research had stayed in

[27] In 2003, Camau and Geisser estimated the number of Nahdawis in exile to be around 1,000; they were mostly living in Britain, France, Belgium, Holland, Germany, Switzerland and Canada (2003, 305).

Tunisia. Only a small number of Sousse activists went into exile (notably Zied Ladhari, a young lawyer who would become an elected deputy from 2011, and Afifa Makhlouf, the women's activist—both spent several years in France). This chapter argues that the prison regime made a determined effort to destroy the movement from within, using a range of coercive practices that were both physical and psychological. Yet, after the harsher early years of the prison experience, Nahdawis found the space to discuss with each other their struggle and what had led them to such a costly confrontation. Assessments varied, but there was a critique of strategic decisions by the leadership that emerged in parallel to but separate from efforts by the movement-in-exile to review the direction of the al-Nahda project. This was the start of a long debate that was not easily resolved: the question of historic evaluations returned in the late 2000s and again after the 2011 uprising. Alongside this intellectual revival of spirit, the prison cell gradually also became a site of material and physical struggle and a place from which to reclaim an individual's dignity. In addition, this repression was experienced too by families, especially women, who were forced to submit to another particular regime of control during their regular visits but who also took advantage of those visits to re-establish a community of belonging.

4.1 Practices of coercion

The Bouchoucha and Bab Saadoun trials targeted the leadership of the movement, and only seven from Sousse were among the defendants, including: Hamadi Jebali, who was sentenced to seventeen years and six months; Ajmi Lourimi, then a political bureau member, who was jailed for life; and Bouraoui Makhlouf, a young man from a prominent religious family in the Old City, who was also jailed for life (Noumi 2011, 95). Yet several hundred other Nahdawis from Sousse were jailed at smaller hearings until the mid-1990s. For example, on 22 April 1993 the Criminal Circuit Court of Appeal of Sousse heard case number 9058 against nineteen suspected al-Nahda members (Case no. 9058 1993). The

23-page judgment offers an insight into the trial process at the local level. Eighteen defendants were convicted of burning a government building, and conspiracy to cause violence against a government official. Two were also convicted of distributing pamphlets that disturbed public order (*tawzīʿ manāshir min annahā taʿkīr ṣafw al-niẓām al-ʿāmm*), belonging to a corrupt association (*al-intimāʾ li-jamʿiyya mufsidīn*), and writing graffiti on the walls.[28] One was also convicted of sheltering a wanted suspect. The case against them was that at dawn on 7 May 1991 the group had attacked a police station inside the Faculty of Law in Sousse, throwing stones and Molotov cocktails. One police officer was injured and the police opened fire on the attackers, hitting one in the leg. The defendants all denied involvement and several complained they had been tortured. They were fined and sentenced to jail terms ranging from six months to five years. Among them were three who after 2011 went on to hold important positions in the regional bureau of the movement in Sousse and a fourth, Samir Dilou, originally from Bizerte but who had been a law student in Sousse in 1991, who went on to be a minister in the first al-Nahda-led government. What the court document fails to convey is the very nature of the proceeding itself, and particularly judge's tight control over what was included in the official transcript. In one rare account, an international observer who attended three similar trials during the 1990s of Tunisian human rights activists and political dissidents, described how defendants' testimonies of torture were omitted from court summaries, how the word 'torture' itself was rarely used, and how defence lawyers used the courtroom as 'the site of extended challenge against the court' (Welchman 2008, 185). Although these cases were against communists rather than Islamists, it is highly likely the hearings were performed in a similar way. The unofficial narrative of the trial experience is striking:

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[28] As in 1981, this second charge referred to a breach of the 1959 law relating to associations, which, under article 30, set a punishment of up to five years for anyone taking part in any association that had not been properly authorised by the interior ministry (Republic of Tunisia 1959).

> Physically, the courtroom was noisy and uncomfortable for defendants, lawyers, and observers alike . . . The judge frequently slapped his hand on the table and used his microphone to shout down defendants and lawyers, cutting them off after a few minutes and thereby preventing them from developing their defence as they saw fit. When some of the defendants sought to name their alleged torturers, the judge cut them off and then refused to enter those names into the summary of the proceedings. Frequent interventions by the judge, the defence attorneys' often frantic attempts to intervene on behalf of their clients during their examination, the lack of amplification of the defendants' voices, and the generally hostile and dismissive attitude of the presiding judge conspired to make the proceedings chaotic at times. (Welchman 2008, 191-2)

The practices of coercion extended even to the defence lawyers trying to insist on a fair hearing for their clients in the courtroom.

The authorities did not admit holding political prisoners, insisting that a Nahdawi prisoner was a criminal like any other inmate. Yet, in the first few months of the mass arrests in 1991 al-Nahda prisoners were held in large groups together and, despite routine brutality and torture during the initial interrogations, they at least were able to organise their lives in a way familiar to Palestinian or Irish Republican prisoners. Around 300 Nahdawis were held in the vastly overcrowded and suffocating Room Two of Sousse prison, with its single toilet and three small windows. They described praying together, studying the Qurʾan, and singing, early in the morning before the guards came for an initial count and after the final count at night. 'When we were together, we didn't feel like we were in prison,' said Hamza, who was arrested in 1991 from his home in Kalaa Kebira. They organised study sessions: one, for example, lectured about the ongoing Palestinian peace negotiations. With the Nahdawis in Sousse was Mohamed Chemli, the regional bureau leader who was from a wealthy textile family. His relatives brought food and other supplies, including notebooks, for the prisoners. However, in October 1991 the system within prison changed and the Islamists were separated and forced to share cells with ordinary criminals, usually four to a room, and were soon moved on to other prisons nationwide. So began the long and isolating prison experience.

Al-Nahda prisoners were immediately treated differently. They soon found they had the words 'special category' (*ṣibgha khāṣṣa*) stamped on their prison documents that separated them from the 'common law' (*ḥaqq al-ʿāmm*) prisoners held alongside them. The Nahdawis referred to themselves collectively as the *intimaʾ*, meaning 'belonging', reclaiming the vocabulary under which many of them had been repeatedly prosecuted since the first trial in 1981, namely the accusation of belonging to an unauthorised association. Special category status did not denote superior conditions but the reverse: a denial of many of the rights offered to ordinary prisoners. One anonymous Nahdawi, who smuggled out a detailed account of prison life, listed an array of deprivations suffered by Islamist prisoners: denial of physical contact during family visits; restrictions on the number and type of visitors; restrictions on how much they could spend on food and goods in the prison shop; and a ban on receiving money from visiting relatives (Sdiri 2003, 78-80).[29] It soon became apparent that the Islamists were not the only targets of prison repression: many other political dissidents, notably members of the PCOT, were arrested from the early 1990s onwards and harshly treated. Yet the Islamists remained by far the most numerous victims in this era of repression.

The primary challenge of prison for the Nahdawis was the routine brutality. The worst torture happened in the first days after arrest, when the detainees remained incommunicado before they were brought before a judge. Brutal techniques possessed their own grotesque vocabulary: '*falaka*', the beating of the soles of the feet; '*poulet rôti*', tying a prisoner to a horizontal pole by his hands and feet; '*avion*', tying a prisoner's hands and feet behind his back and beating him; '*bano*', suspending the prisoner by his ankles and

[29] The pseudonym given to the author by the human rights activists who published his account was Abdelwahab Sdiri, a combination of the names of two al-Nahda prisoners who died in prison in 2002: Abdelwahab Boussaa, who died after a four-month hunger strike, and Lakhdhar Sdiri, who died from lack of medical care (Sdiri 2003, 15).

plunging his head into a bucket of dirty water (Amnesty International 2008, 16). Other punishments included electric shocks, burning with cigarettes, and sexual abuse, including rape, of both male and female prisoners (Amnesty International 2008, 16; Gray 2012, 295). In interviews, Nahdawi informants gave detailed accounts of many aspects of their prison years but, perhaps not surprisingly, shunned from speaking of the violence they suffered. 'We in Sousse were under the baton of torture, the horrors of torture. It is humiliating to tell the stories of that torture', said Jamel, who was held in Sousse prison in autumn 1991. Another, who was jailed from 1991 to 1993, said: 'There was torture. They tried to get from me the maximum information to know the *organigramme*: Who is responsible for you? Who do you have links with? Who is below you?' (Hassan). The purpose of torture was not merely to extract information, but to provoke the rest of the movement into a violent reaction the better to repress it. Indeed, some were surprised how quickly al-Nahda collapsed, including one Tunisian scholar who noted at the time: 'No one expected that the movement could be so easily liquefied' (Hermassi 1994, 33). However, contrary to the views of some who saw al-Nahda as an inherently violent organisation (Dunn 1994), there is little evidence that the movement had a real commitment to an armed struggle against the regime, less still the resources to carry that out on anything approaching an Algerian scale (Willis 2012, 176-7). Rhetorically defiant statements from al-Nahda leaders alienated ordinary Tunisians, yet they revealed not the militarism of the movement but rather its fragility at its greatest moment of crisis.

Torture was a shared experience that became emblematic in memories of the particular persecution directed against al-Nahda. Many admitted revealing names and organisational information under torture, but because in the end the wave of arrests was so sudden and so comprehensive there seemed no blame attributed to those who confessed. Although the worst of the torture was limited to the initial interrogation, the denial of

medical treatment became a great physical challenge and many prisoners died of their illnesses in prison or shortly after leaving. In the case of the Sousse activists, these included Ali Nouir, the preacher and founding member of the MTI, who died of ill-health six years after his release from jail, and Ezzedine Ben Aisha, a prominent activist from Kalaa Kebira, who died in his cell in August 1994. In total, the movement listed nineteen Sousse 'martyrs' who since 1981 were killed or died from illnesses contracted in prison (Harakat al-Nahda n.d.-b). The violence was always proximate, but often a ghostly presence. Another prisoner from Sousse was in the jail where Ben Aisha died:

> He died next to us, in the cell next to us, but we didn't realise for a whole year until someone came from another prison and told us that Ezzedine Ben Aisha was dead. It was very strange. You hear nothing, you see nothing. (Rachid)

A shared experience of torture forged a collective memory of the prison challenge and added another accrued layer of group identity.

Beyond the physical punishments were other strategies designed to break the will of the prisoners. There were repeated efforts to force prisoners to submit to the arbitrary rule of prison officers. In the late 1990s in a Tunis prison the guards forced prisoners to salute an officer's cap, which had been left on a chair, and a guard dog tied up in the prison courtyard (Solidarité Tunisienne 2003). Others described how non-Islamist prisoners turned informers; the Islamists referred to such a prisoner as a songbird, a 'lark' (*qubbar*), because they reported back to the guards on private Nahdawi discussions. There were consistent efforts to isolate the Islamist prisoners from each other. Many al-Nahda prisoners described periods of solitary confinement, usually alone in a cell though sometimes in small group isolation and often for periods of many months or, for more senior leaders, many years. Hamadi Jebali, the prominent Sousse leader, spent ten years in solitary. Ajmi Lourimi, another senior Sousse leader, spent most of his sixteen years in jail in solitary. Human Rights Watch estimated that more than 500 political prisoners had been

jailed in solitary out of a 'political will to punish and demoralize these individuals, and to crush the Islamist trend they represent' (2004, 1-2). Solitary confinement in what prisoners called the '*siloun*' (a derivation of the French *cellule*), meant being locked in a small cell that was suffocating in summer and freezing in winter, with a small toilet or plastic bottles serving as a urinal and with blankets covered in lice, being forced to wear a blue prison uniform instead of the usual ordinary clothes, or even to go naked, being denied family visits or food packages, and being made to take the weekly shower alone when other prisoners had finished washing (Sdiri 2003, 68; Noumi). As one prisoner recounted:

> I was in a *siloun*, a small room with a toilet and you are handcuffed to the wall, naked, and at the tap even the water was limited. The water ran only when they opened the tap from outside. It was very humid, and there was constant torture and harassment. (Jamel)

Isolation was also achieved by moving the prisoners from one jail to the next every few months, often without informing their families. This prisoner, Jamel, a doctor from Gafsa who had studied and had begun working in Sousse when he was arrested, was moved frequently during his eight-year sentence.

> I was moved in twenty-two convoys from one prison to another. You lived without any stability. Tomorrow you don't know what will happen to you or who will be your cellmate. You can't pray in groups, you can't eat with your colleagues, you can't buy anything. (Jamel)

As well as this physical isolation and instability, the prison regime imposed an informational blackout. Authorised newspapers, usually the official Tunisian press, were sometimes available but often prisoners found the most interesting articles, usually involving international affairs, particularly the conflict in Algeria, had been cut out leaving what they called 'windows' (*shabābīk*) in the page. Wrapping from the soap or food brought by relatives was removed before it reached the prisoners, so it could not be used as notepaper, and pens were forbidden in the early years.

Occasionally the isolation took a public turn: a number of Nahdawis formally disowned the movement through public notices published in the national press. The notices

were all similar: each was a paragraph long and gave the full name and identity card number of the individual who had written to the paper, followed by their disavowal of the Islamist movement and pledge of allegiance to Ben Ali, the RCD, and his 7 November 1987 coup. One such notice, headlined ‘A Clarification’ read:

> . . . he notifies that he never belonged to what is called the al-Nahda movement and that he strongly opposes its principles and does not sympathise with its followers and that he is proud to belong to the Democratic Constitutional Rally. ("Rafʿ Iltibas" 1993)

Another, headlined ‘A Declaration of Innocence and Commitment’, read:

> . . . he notifies that he is completely innocent of belonging to or communicating with or in any way dealing with what is called the al-Nahda movement, and expresses his absolute commitment to the principles of 7 November. ("Tabarraʾ wa-Iltizam" 1993)

These notices may have been a bureaucratic necessity in order to allow an individual to sign an employment contract or to resolve a difficulty with the local police or municipal administration. This would be in line with other administrative papers that quickly assumed great importance, including the Bulletin No. 3, which attested to a police record and a jail sentence of more than two months and which ex-prisoners often needed in order to be cleared for work (Hibou 2011, 7). However, for the individuals involved it also had its own punitive function, a formal, public disavowal of both the al-Nahda project and their religious commitment. As one said:

> It was more significant than just resigning from the movement. It was not just to resign but to take up another position and to completely disown the movement as if we were non-believers, as if we had left God. (Nabil)

There was much resistance to such public repudiations from within the movement, despite intense pressure from the regime on both Nahdawis and their families.

This array of coercive practices was intended to dissolve from within a movement that had presented a robust political challenge to the regime. There is no doubt about the level of brutality employed in pursuit of this goal. However, those sentenced to longer jail

terms eventually began to seek out ways to skirt the imposed isolation and to reclaim a sense of shared belonging.

4.2 Evaluation

Despite the prolonged and coercive repression, the Nahdawis were not merely quiescent victims of the prison system. The worst of the physical violence was generally limited to the early 1990s and, although the coercive techniques continued for many years, the prisoners did find ways to adapt. Despite the frequently imposed isolation, some prisoners held extended discussions about the events that had led to the crackdown and particularly about how much responsibility the movement bore for its fate. These were not large, organised meetings but rather discussions between two or three cellmates at a time. When one prisoner was moved on to another jail he or she would take with them the ideas discussed and continue the debate with others in the new surroundings. In this way an informal, unwritten and often remarkably critical assessment of the movement's past circulated through the jails, described by those involved as an 'evaluation' (*taqyīm*) along the lines of the Project of Priorities in the 1980s.

Separately, a formal evaluation was carried out by the leaders of the movement-in-exile. The leadership abroad, at least in the early 1990s, was unable to make direct contact with the Tunisian prisoners, which meant the review was not comprehensive and explains why another project of evaluation was felt necessary in the late 2000s and again in the post-2011 transitional period. In June 1996 the movement issued from London a long summary of its internal discussions, entitled 'Lessons from the Past, Present Problems and Future Ambitions', signed by Ghannouchi himself (Harakat al-Nahda 2012b). The document reads as an effort by the leadership to defend decisions made during the confrontation with Ben Ali but also, perhaps reflecting the reality of exile and the need to placate host governments, it redirected the movement away from its long-held political

ambition. It made some striking admissions. First, it noted that in the late 1980s the movement's political work had overwhelmed its cultural and social activities and brought it into confrontation with the regime: 'The supremacy of the political field over the *daʿwa* and cultural fields had a negative effect on the path of the movement and the development of the awakening' (Harakat al-Nahda 2012b, 62). The movement announced it would now eschew its former political ambitions, in favour of other projects:

> We confirm the priority of the cultural and the social over the political, meaning that the political takes on new intellectual meaning and content so that it primarily serves the educational and cultural mission (Harakat al-Nahda 2012b, 85).

Second, it accepted al-Nahda had failed to build alliances with other opposition parties and with the elite during the 1980s, which left it isolated in a highly polarised society. Third, it admitted that acts of violence undermined the movement's position. Even though al-Nahda's formal stance was in favour of non-violence, it acknowledged there had been some 'excesses' (*al-tajāwuzat*), including the throwing of Molotov petrol bombs and the attack on the RCD office at Bab Souika in 1991, which it admitted marked a turning point in al-Nahda's fortunes.[30] However, it also deflected blame for the confrontation, saying that the Ben Ali regime had taken a security-first approach following the 1989 election and that it was only after the regime had hardened its position that the movement too hardened its stance. Al-Nahda tried to avoid civil war, it said, by abandoning its confrontational approach in 1992, but it was not helped by the international situation, in which Islamist movements were increasingly targets of suspicion. It insisted the movement was committed to non-violence and to its 'Islamic identity'. However, it also appealed for

[30] There are some revealing textual differences here. The mention of 'excesses' and of Bab Souika does not seem to appear in the version of this document published by al-Nahda in a collection of historic party documents in 2012, a moment in the post-uprising transition when the movement faced constant media questioning and suspicion over its commitment to democracy and non-violence. However, it does appear in an online version of the statement published on an opposition website in 2010, shortly before the fall of Ben Ali, when, as we will see, the movement was trying to revive itself and reconcile with the regime (Harakat al-Nahda 2010).

'national dialogue' and 'comprehensive national reconciliation' to solve the political crisis in Tunisia and asked its members to be patient.

Not surprisingly, however, the idea of reconciling with the regime was unacceptable to most prisoners. In their view, the repression that followed the elections and the brutality they suffered under interrogation demonstrated that this was not a regime open to negotiation. As Jebali put it:

> Ben Ali pushed everyone to conclude that this was a man we just couldn't deal with. We saw it was a waste of time. We must resist. Ben Ali, with his wrongdoing in prison and abroad towards our families, even towards the opposition that had allied with him, gave us evidence that it made no difference. It changed nothing. (Jebali)

This was a view that would eventually change, even for individuals like Jebali who came to accept the idea of reconciliation, but not until most prisoners had been released by the mid-2000s. Indeed, among lower ranks of al-Nahda in the early 1990s there remained considerable frustration with the leadership for the decisions taken during the confrontation. Even among those in exile, there were clear signs of internal discontent. In 1993 and 1994 two senior Nahdawis in exile in Paris resigned and criticised Ghannouchi for favouring a policy of confrontation, which they said led to the mass arrests and crackdown that followed (Camau and Geisser 2003, 306). Salah Karkar, in particular, grew increasingly distant from the movement while in exile until he was formally excluded in 2002. He argued for a renunciation of the political project in favour of training and education to bring back society's Islamic character (Camau and Geisser 2003, 307-8). Al-Nahda exiles and Tunisian observers sensed the movement was on the brink of collapse, 'torn and weakened by its own contradictions' (Hermassi 1991, 203). After all, Ghannouchi seemed to have committed a series of 'profound tactical mistakes', by leaving the country as early as 1989, through his radical vocabulary, and in overestimating popular support for a confrontation with the regime (Murphy 1999, 200-201). At the first congress

in exile, held in Belgium in 1995, Ghannouchi, who had been granted political asylum in London two years earlier, was only narrowly re-elected president of the movement, winning just 52 percent of the vote (Tamimi 2001, 72).[31] New internal laws were introduced limiting his powers by requiring the large Consultative Council to approve his nominees to the cabinet, the Executive Bureau.

Discussions within the Tunisian prisons tended to be yet more critical of the leadership, though given that this was not an organised process and that findings were not formally written down it is difficult to make a direct comparison with the mood in exile. However, the strategic choices of the late 1980s were the most important topic under debate within the prisons, as well as the institutional nature of decision-making within the movement. Many were frustrated that the leadership had rushed into decisions to enter the elections at full strength and then to confront the regime afterwards. Many felt their views had not been considered and that they now paid the price. Some prisoners, particularly those from the lower ranks, argued that the movement should have taken a more cautious approach for its first entry into the political process. They argued it should have kept to its original risk-averse plan to contest only a handful of constituencies in order not to unnerve the regime. Indeed, although the movement had first approached the election cautiously, even accepting the idea of a joint opposition list, it soon decided to run a vigorous nationwide campaign. One young Sousse activist, who was born in 1968, said:

> It wasn't necessary to enter the elections on the scale that we did. We could have entered only partially, and given the regime space not to be afraid of us or to panic about us . . . There were also some who said the Islamist movement shouldn't involve itself in such a radical confrontation with the regime. They could have established some dialogue and been patient in the face of attack and not rush to a reaction. You shouldn't use up all your force in confronting the authorities. The Islamist movement, with its modest capacity, couldn't confront the authorities with their military capabilities. The best thing was to be patient, to take the path of

[31] The congresses-in-exile were held in Belgium in 1995, and London in 2001 and 2007 (Allani 2009, 268). The next congress, the ninth, was held in 2012 in Tunis and the tenth in Hammamet in May 2016.

> dialogue, to make concessions and to be silent in the face of insults in order to achieve other goals. (Bechir)

After all, a cautious approach to political entry was to become characteristic of other Islamist movements in similar authoritarian and semi-authoritarian circumstances in Morocco, Egypt, and Turkey (Willis 2004; Brown 2012, 25; Tezcür 2010). Among Tunisian prisoners, this sense that the election campaign had been rushed was widely held. In terms of strategy, it indicated that a more modest approach would be less costly if the opportunity for political inclusion were ever to emerge again. However, it also meant that individual Nahdawis inside the Tunisian prisons came to the additional view that political zeal could undermine the original Islamising mission. It was to implant in them a long-lasting wariness about the cost of prioritising a state-level political project.

Many were angry that the leadership had opted for full confrontation with the regime. Rachid, the maths teacher who had been a local-level organiser in El-Jem in the 1980s, was deeply troubled by the movement's actions. He had played an organisational role in Sousse during the 1989 elections and was already a member of the movement's Consultative Council. He spent ten months in hiding between December 1990 and October 1991. He was eventually arrested, then convicted in the military trial at Bouchoucha, where he was sentenced to eleven years in jail, which he spent in ten different prisons across the country. He argued that the movement had been right to take part in the 1989 elections, but had been wrong to confront the regime with popular demonstrations afterwards.

> Even though the regime pushed our back against the wall I thought that we could have found a way out. If we had continued to try to normalise our situation and not pushed too hard for legal authorisation perhaps we could have got out of it. The biggest mistake was in my view the plan of confrontation with the authorities. It wasn't well put together. I said that I had confidence in the morals of the leadership but not in their competence and strategy. Al-Nahda pushed too hard without having a plan of retreat, or an alternative. We spent years in prison and for what? Our movement didn't manage to free anyone. How could we believe

> that the authorities would give us freedoms after it had removed them all? (Rachid)

Rachid spent two years in discussion with Abdelhamid Jelassi, a senior movement leader who played a key role in this prison evaluation, while together in a cell in Monastir.[32] He then spent two years with Ajmi Lourimi and Sahbi Aatig, two other senior leaders, in a cell at 9 avril prison in Tunis. Rachid was the pessimist of the group by his own account, while Lourimi was more optimistic and defensive of the leadership's actions, and Aatig took a position between his two cellmates. These drawn-out debates showed how much space the prisoners had found in which to undertake this strategic reassessment.

Some complained that the leadership had failed to protect those thousands of Nahdawis who were jailed. A few even suggested the movement could have shown more defiance. Walid, who had just graduated as a medical student in Sousse, was arrested in May 1991 for taking part in a stone-throwing demonstration against police in the university district. He was among those convicted during the Sousse court case in 1993 and imprisoned until 2006. In his debates in prison he argued with his cellmates that it had been a mistake for the leadership to dissolve the movement in Tunisia by seeking exile abroad:

> They emigrated from Tunisia, some went to Sudan, some to Algeria at that time, and some went to Europe. But they refused to engage the movement in a confrontation with Ben Ali, despite the repression of Ben Ali, and more than that they dissolved the organisation.
>
> Q: That was a mistake in your view?
>
> At that time it was a mistake.

---

[32] Jelassi, a chemical engineer born in 1960 in Menzel Temime, in northeastern Tunisia, was a prominent student activist in the 1980s and was imprisoned in 1987 and 1991-2007. After jail he lived in Hai Riadh, in Sousse, with his wife Monia Ibrahim, herself a senior al-Nahda figure who had spent a month and a half in jail in 1994. Jelassi went on to become the movement's vice-president in 2011-16.

Q: But was there another choice?

> Yes, they could have continued the organisation, undertaken training of those already enrolled in the movement and at least those remaining could have brought others to the movement. At the same time, they could have taken care of people inside the prison and those who had left prison. But when they dissolved the organisation they cut the links between the prison and those abroad, and many people scattered and were homeless with no one to communicate with and without even knowing how to act. In addition, because there was no reaction from the movement, Ben Ali, instead of saying: 'That's enough', he hit them again and again, and increased his repression. (Walid)

Such overt criticism was relatively rare, but clearly some among the prisoners and those Nahdawis left behind in Tunisia felt abandoned. They discussed among themselves possible methods of regime change: popular revolution, armed revolt, military coup, and electoral democracy. Though a minority in the movement, or among former movement members, had considered the strategy of violence in the past, there was a broad realisation now that non-violence was the only acceptable strategy for the future. They discussed popular protests in South Korea and Latin America, and whether, as Walid believed at the time, stone throwing should be considered a method of non-violent action. Their experience, as well as the crisis in Algeria, taught them the grave risks of trying for a popular revolution without sufficient preparation or popular support. The hope of change through electoral democracy had been suffocated by the regime's response to the 1989 elections, and the choreographed RCD victories in subsequent elections. This process of debate, however, did go on to shape the approach of movement leaders inside Tunisia in the 2000s, when they began to push cautiously for inclusion in the political system.

Given that there were clearly diverging views among the prisoners it is surprising that the fallout of repression did not bring more structural divisions. Five senior figures inside Tunisia had indeed resigned from al-Nahda at the height of the crackdown, notably Mourou, the Tunis lawyer and one of the co-founders of the movement, who by repudiating the movement's confrontational approach managed to avoid jail during the

1990s and 2000s.[33] However, many former prisoners stressed the importance of not attributing blame to individuals but rather to movement structures or collective decision-making. They had prioritised the unity of the movement at a time of repression and were reluctant to descend into the factional infighting that had, for example, characterised debates among leftist Tunisian political prisoners in the 1970s. Many were aware of the risks. As Rachid put it:

> The left had conversations like this during their arrests in the 1970s but it was very punishing and caused real damage. Each divergence created a new party . . . For us it wasn't like that. What ties us together is more important. We have a deeper cause: we want to modernise our country by going back to its Arab-Islamic face. We may differ on some questions but we can work together.

As a result, there was rather less internal disagreement than within the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood in the 1950s-60s, which struggled to reconcile longstanding structural and strategic disagreements (Zollner 2007, 413-4). Yet, although al-Nahda managed to maintain its structural integrity during the years of repression, the prison debates had not resolved the disagreements. This explains the return to a tentative process of evaluation in the late 2000s, and a more serious and far-reaching effort after 2011. The movement's own historical narrative remained contested.

Alongside the extended debates among Nahdawi prisoners, the jail cell offered rare opportunities to debate with leftists, who made up the majority of non-Islamist political prisoners. One Sousse prisoner, Salah Nouir, spent some time in the early 1990s sharing a cell in Sousse prison with Hamma Hammami, the leader of the PCOT. From their shared experience of repression they crossed what outside prison had seemed like an unbridgeable polarised divide. Nouir remembered:

> He was next to me, by chance. We were very harmonious together, like friends. We told each other stories about the failures of our society. I couldn't believe how

[33] There was considerable regime pressure on these individuals to force them to resign from and to disavow the strategy of the movement (Murphy 1999, 196; Burgat 1993, 243).

> kind he was. There was no ideological battle because we were in the same bag, facing the same difficulties. There were values that we shared. (Nouir)

It is possible that this shared experience of prison repression helped push some in the movement towards an important opposition alliance that emerged in 2005, but such cross-ideological sympathies were short lived. A bitter polarisation returned to political debates immediately after the 2011 uprising, particularly between the left, including the PCOT, and al-Nahda.

The very act of debate among the prisoners, however circumscribed by the logic of coercion, was an effort to recover a collective identity. Building on these discussions, prisoners then found ways to pass notes to each other during walks in the courtyard and during transfers from one prison to the next. In this way a rudimentary network of communication was established. Even if the al-Nahda prison debates were ultimately inconclusive, at least they allowed a long period of internal reflection, which I argue was to prove important in shaping the movement's strategy in the 2000s and again after 2011. Debate reinforced the frayed social bonds between prisoners and so defied the isolating ambitions of the practices of coercion. Moreover, if it was possible to debate, soon too it became possible to resist.

4.3 A site of struggle

Evaluating the movement's past was one form of resistance to the prison regime. From the mid-1990s, some prisoners also began physical acts of protest, which soon reached the level of individual and, occasionally, collective hunger strikes. These protests acknowledged the dominant sovereignty of the prison system. Strikers had limited demands that focused on material improvements or on trying to force prison authorities to obey formal prison regulations, rather than rejecting the prison system entirely. Yet hunger strikers were harshly punished, with beatings, isolation, and crude force-feeding, a

response that suggests the prison authorities felt a significant challenge to their authority. For the prisoners themselves, the act of giving up food and water offered a brief chance to regain control over their bodies, their material conditions, and their dignity.

The prison experience could be described in three stages, according to one Sousse law student who was aged nineteen when he began an eight-year jail term in 1991.

> The first stage was the destruction of the movement: a ban on visits, prayers, studies, writing. I spent a year alone in a small cell, a very hard experience. The second stage was discovering yourself, understanding how to adapt. But then came the third stage: refusal. (Mehdi)

The stage of refusal began in the mid-1990s, as an act born out of frustration. Jamel, a medical student who had studied in Sousse, said the hunger strikes originated with the younger members of the movement.

> Enough was enough. Most of the young people didn't hesitate to act violently towards themselves by going on hunger strike. No one cared about the hunger because we felt we were about to explode. We didn't even think of what long-term damage it might cause. People's patience had come to its limit. Most of the young people couldn't accept that we should bear it any more. They were no longer tolerant, no longer accepting this humiliation. Even if they felt the strike might harm them they counted on their dignity because it was the only thing they had with which to confront others. (Jamel)

By denying himself food, the prisoner retook control of his or her body, which became no longer an object of repression but a subject of resilience. Self-denial brought not just the hope of concessions from the authorities but also dignity. In November 1996 Nahdawi prisoners held in Tunis, Mahdia, Gafsa, Gabes, Harboub, and Sidi Bouzid, staged an organised hunger strike in the weeks before International Human Rights Day to claim their legal rights as prisoners and to demand an end to arbitrary punishments (Sdiri 2003, 124). The prisoners had organised this several months in advance by sending notes to each other within prison and as they were transported from one prison to the next. As well as refusing food or refusing both food and water (a '*sec*' or dry hunger strike), others made themselves sick by drinking shampoo or cleaning fluid (known by its brand name 'Omo') in order to fill the prison infirmaries. Eventually, there were negotiations with the prison authorities

and the strike was ended when improved conditions were promised. However, there were also punishments. In Mahdia prison dozens of the hunger strikers were beaten, put into isolation, or moved to other prisons as punishment (Sdiri 2003, 125). Other prisoners were called before a judge and given up to two years' additional prison time added to their sentence (Solidarité Tunisienne 2003). Nonetheless Human Rights Watch reported, based on testimony from recently released prisoners, that conditions began to improve in jails from around this date (2004, 12). Nahdawi prisoners were now allowed to eat together and to have copies of the Qurʾan. In October 1997 Nahdawi prisoners at 9 avril prison in Tunis were allowed to pray together in the prison courtyard, which Samir Dilou, one of the inmates held there, described as a 'fundamental change' (Human Rights Watch 2004, 12). Ali Laarayedh, the prisoner who endured most solitary confinement, said that in 1996 he was allowed a pen, and the following year a notebook too, as well as access to more books and to pro-government newspapers. Lighting improved in his cell from 1998, although his one window was still almost entirely boarded up, and the duration of family visits was increased to twenty-five minutes. From May 2004 he was allowed a television in his cell (Human Rights Watch 2005, 17-18).[34] Jelassi, the senior movement leader, later described carefully hiding a pen in his cell for seven years because it offered him a sense of his 'humanity': 'I am thankful for that pen. It saved a part of me. It was a friend to me in difficult times' (al-Naqati 2016). The material improvements were incremental but significant. The risks the prisoners took, though, were grave. Several died from hunger strikes or from untreated illnesses that were worsened by their protests.

The demands of the hunger strikers were often modest and legalistic. Bouraoui Makhlouf, one of the Sousse prisoners sentenced to life, spent forty-seven days on hunger

[34] However, access to television channels was carefully controlled. For example, by 2004 Jebali was also allowed a television in his solitary confinement cell but it was tuned to broadcast only *Canal Tunis*, the state channel (Human Rights Watch 2004, 17).

strike at Borj El Amri prison, near Tunis, from December 2003. He demanded an end to his solitary confinement, more time outside his cell beyond the fifteen-minute walk allowed each day, and the provision of a television set, which was the only demand to which the prison authorities eventually acceded (Human Rights Watch 2004, 20). Rachid, the maths teacher, described frequent brief hunger strikes for modest goals. In Sidi Bouzid prison in 1998, he went on hunger strike when the newly-arrived governor curtailed his daily walks outside his cell. He was sent to a punishment cell for ten days for his trouble. Then in 1999 at Grombalia prison, in Nabeul, he again went on hunger strike to demand transfer to a prison in the Sahel to be close to his family in Sousse. Eventually, he was transferred to Monastir prison. Then at Monastir he began another strike to demand better lighting so he could read, and a longer daily walk outside his cell. 'It was a chronic malady that I had. I kept making small problems for my demands' (Rachid). Just as his sentence was coming to an end in 2002, he staged another strike in Messadine prison to demand that the court remove repeat sentences from his conviction.

> I said to the governor: 'I am not asking for an amnesty. I just want your injustice to be just. I was convicted to this sentence and I served my time, so why make me do it again for nothing?' I really didn't want an amnesty, I wanted my rights. (Rachid)

Eventually, the hunger strike became a central element of political resistance to the Ben Ali regime across the political spectrum. In April 2000 Taoufik Ben Brik, a prominent Tunisian freelance journalist and human rights activist, went on a high-profile hunger strike for forty-three days after he was accused of spreading false information and defaming public institutions (Ben Brik 2011). In June 2002 the prominent lawyer Radhia Nasraoui announced a hunger strike to protest the re-imprisonment of her husband Hamma Hammami, the PCOT leader, who had emerged from four years in hiding (Lawless 2003, 1076). A rare opposition coalition that emerged in 2005, uniting Islamists with communists and others, was launched with another high-profile hunger strike in Tunis. The self-denial

of food and water was an act of resistance that in its non-violence undermined the legitimacy of the Tunisian regime and exposed the reality of coercion that lay behind the state's illusory promise of tolerance.

If the hunger strike was in part an act of dignity, then for some few prisoners there was dignity too in adapting themselves to a private regime of contemplation, study, and prayer. The act of daily reading of the Qurʾan, when prisoners were eventually allowed copies of the book from the mid-1990s, recurs as a common theme.

> Even though these conditions were catastrophic, there was a great potential for patience. When you repeated over and over the parts of the Qurʾan that you memorised it was the greatest refuge for us. The day passed as if it was just an hour. (Jamel)

Rachid, the frequent hunger striker, gave the most detailed account of this experience of routine study. He pointed to personal faith as a way of achieving contentment even in the prison environment.

> Q: How did the movement survive this episode?
>
> . . . We held strongly to spiritual issues and it was well founded, because that is how we faced that infernal machine. We experienced its torture, but despite that we were very content. People don't imagine this. Perhaps they think Islamists have pretensions or that we exaggerate. But it's true. Once in Sidi Bouzid prison I was in individual detention, alone in a cell. At the end of my bed was the toilet and close to my ear a place to pray and eat. A guard asked me: 'What do you do during the day?' I told him: 'I do my prayers, then breakfast, then I recite the Qurʾan by heart, then I read my newspaper, then I read a book from the library but sometimes I don't have time to finish my work.' The guard was very hard, very bad, and he mocked me . . . But when I was in Sidi Bouzid I felt bliss, the happiness of someone who is alone. Believe me after eight months there, when I was transferred to Grombalia, in my heart I cried that I'd lost that chance. It was splendid. It was something extraordinary . . . Believe me those twelve years in prison were a digression that passed in just a few seconds. I was very much at ease, as if nothing had happened. (Rachid)

These experiences seem to have been confined to those prisoners serving longer jail terms, who had lived through the brutality of the early years of the prison repression in the 1990s and who had reconciled themselves to a long period in jail, often alone. They also seemed to depend on the particular regulations of an individual prison and its governor. Rachid's

experience of ‘bliss’ in his cell was confined to eight months he spent in Sidi Bouzid under a particular governor who operated a more relaxed regime, allowing him longer walks and the chance to buy additional food in the prison shop. Much may have had to do with the individual prisoner: Rachid was determined to study his way through his jail term. As well as reading the Qurʾan, he spent eight years teaching himself French from newspapers and prison library books. Still, these descriptions of contentment behind bars echo experiences recorded elsewhere, even among less overtly religious prisoners. For example, Richard English describes how Republican prisoners in Northern Ireland in the 1980s took seriously to reading and studying. He quotes one prisoner as saying: ‘“There is nobody who was on those wings who didn’t enjoy themselves tremendously and say they are the best time I’ve ever had in jail”’ (English 2003, 235-6).

Hunger strikes directed at small material concessions soon became a regular part of the prison experience, not just for Nahdawis but for other political prisoners too. In some cases, they brought small improvements in the quality of life of the prisoners, but they also transformed the prisoners’ cells into sites of struggle and their bodies into subjects of resilience, even resistance. What is surprising is that most Nahdawi prisoners were released one or two years before the formal end of their sentences, often in a series of presidential amnesties beginning in the late 1990s. This gradual relaxation of repression seems to have been the result of publicity by opposition groups of these frequent hunger strikes and poor conditions, as well as the detailed attention of international human rights groups, which embarrassed the regime abroad and distracted from its propaganda of tolerance and reform. This also may explain the slow improvement of prison conditions in the 2000s. In that sense, the hunger strikes may have achieved some of their aims, but these actions carried further implications. Beyond the well-documented evidence of brutality, the Nahdawis’ own accounts of the prison years also speak counter-intuitively of

'dignity', 'contentment' and, occasionally, even 'bliss'. This is not to exaggerate a biography of resistance, for the al-Nahda movement was indeed severely depleted from the early 1990s onwards and many individuals were indeed harmed, physically and psychologically. Rather, it is to suggest that in this prison experience we find the unexpected seeds of a future revival of the Nahdawi community. All acknowledge that this could not have happened without the sustenance offered by families outside the prison walls.

4.4 Support from the outside

Given that the logic of the prison regime was that it should extinguish al-Nahda entirely, it was inevitable that this repressive power should reach beyond the prison walls. Mothers, fathers, wives, husbands, sisters, and brothers of imprisoned Nahdawis were also disciplined, through harassment, interrogation, physical beating, and frequent impediments during prison visits. Women, in particular, were identified as a target for surveillance because through their enduring relationships with their husbands, brothers and sons they became a vital pillar of support. Such repression was, of course, strikingly inconsistent with the regime's constant positioning of itself as a champion of women's progress and demonstrated that the rights of Tunisian women were secondary to the priority of repression.

Many women were identified as targets for repression because of their involvement in the movement. Monia Ibrahim was one of the senior female figures in the movement in Sousse, and the wife of Abdelhamid Jelassi. She was pregnant, aged 24, when her husband was arrested on 6 April 1991: he went on to spend nearly seventeen years in jail. Ibrahim herself was arrested in April 1994 in Sousse by a Department of State Security intelligence unit, the Information Brigade (*firqāt al-irshād*), and was sentenced to eighteen months in jail but then was released in June 1994, when an appeal court ruled she had no case to

answer. Despite the ruling, she spent five years under strict surveillance. She had to report three times a day at two security offices in Sousse. She was banned from leaving the city without authorisation and was subject to frequent interrogation. Although qualified as a psychologist, she could only find menial work. Ibrahim described her life in an open letter in May 2004, published by an opposition website:

> I didn't stop asking 'Why?' And I always got the same answer, which was roughly: 'We know you, it's not about you, it's about your husband!' What law or custom punishes twice, first the person and second their family? (Ibrahim 2004)

At the time her husband was in Borj El Amri prison, near Tunis, in solitary confinement. He had spent fifty days on hunger strike to demand access to reading books, notebooks, letters, newspapers and a television. The impact of his sentence was felt well beyond the prison cell. Ibrahim wrote:

> Sentencing by the court is not just the deprivation of freedom; it also deprives you of your mental and physical health and leads to a state that is synonymous with death, but a slow death. What my husband is enduring in prison and what we are suffering outside has pushed my 13-year-old daughter to ask herself whether she too will be deprived of her freedom and chained up as the daughter of parents considered undesirable by the security services. Her questions sum up how she has lived since birth, an existence filled with policemen, prison guards, gloomy visits, and a metal grill separating her from a father she no longer knows because she was born five months after his arrest and because she has been allowed only one direct visit since. (Ibrahim 2004)

The coercion of imprisonment also touched wives and children outside jail. Even the unvoiced threat of future imprisonment had an immediate repressive effect. It was not just the women of al-Nahda who suffered like this, for women with other political affiliations were also imprisoned or targeted for repression. For example, a wave of arrests in 1992 targeted female members of the communist PCOT. What had at first seemed like a crackdown targeting only the Islamists soon widened to envelope all political dissidents.

The women of al-Nahda were subject to an array of coercive practices, especially if they were members of the movement themselves or if their husbands were in jail or had fled into exile. Many were held for the unauthorised collection of money or donations,

which meant that any financial support given by sympathetic friends or relatives could be turned against the women as evidence of criminality. Amendments to the penal code introduced in 1993 also made Tunisians liable to prosecution for activities conducted outside the country if they were considered an offence under Tunisian law. Thus a meeting with other Nahdawis abroad, in France for example, was grounds for arrest and conviction on return to Tunisia (Amnesty International 1995, 17-18). Once under arrest or in prison, the women of al-Nahda were often subject to violent abuse: torture, beatings, sexual assaults, and, on some occasions, rape. As early as 1993 Amnesty International documented accounts of forced undressing, abuse, threats of rape, and sexual assault suffered by female al-Nahda members and other female political dissidents after arrest (Amnesty International 1993). There were also informal acts of control. Many women were told to stop wearing the hijab and some even to divorce their husbands if they wanted to continue their jobs. The wife of one Sousse activist came under considerable accumulated pressure to divorce her husband, who had been a local level activist in the movement. As a schoolteacher she was the sole breadwinner for her two daughters while her husband spent eight years in jail. Her husband's brother, not himself a Nahdawi, was jailed and forced to shut his restaurant. She agreed to the divorce in order to keep her job, though shortly after her husband was released from jail the couple remarried and had a third child (Noumi). Other prisoners tried as much as they could to shield their children from what was happening. One Sousse activist, Abdelfattah, was arrested in 1992, five months after his first son was born, and was released from jail the following year. He chose not to tell his son that he had even been to prison: 'That was my choice. There are others whose children knew everything. I chose not to tell him because I know psychology: I didn't want to put up a barrier between us' (Abdelfattah). Several years later, when his

son was a teenager and had won a place in the highly regarded Lycée Pilote in Sousse, the boy found out about his father's past in the playground.

> He was insulted by one of his friends who said that his father was in jail. He came home and said: 'Someone said you were in jail!' I talked with him and told him it was my choice not to tell him so he would grow up as a normal child. One day he should know his father was in jail, but not because he was a criminal but because he was struggling for a new idea and way of thinking, and in the end my son accepted that. (Abdelfattah)

His account reveals the calculations made by individual families. It also showed that even a brief prison sentence had remained public knowledge in his local community, such that it might leak out more than a decade later in a children's playground.

Yet within these practices of coercion lay unexpected opportunities to engage, however briefly, as a like-minded community once again. Prison authorities made the weekly family visits as difficult as possible, restricting access to the closest family members and then forcing them to wait in line for several hours before the brief audience with the prisoner was permitted. The result was that on the day of prison visits large groups of mothers, wives, and sisters met at the prison and spent several hours talking, spreading news, offering reassurance, and reinforcing community bonds. One al-Nahda activist, Kawther, a schoolteacher in Sousse, visited her husband in prison during his 19-month jail term and, with her sister, spent eleven years visiting her brother Rachid, the maths teacher, in prisons scattered across the country. The regular visits were a source of solidarity:

> Outside the prison we talked together. Everyone talked about the conditions they were facing . . . When we met, us women, we tried to give each other resolve. We weren't sad, we didn't cry, no, no. You found love, humour, we told each other jokes, that was normal. We gave each other resolve. We were happy and we believed the day would come when we would triumph. We were not afraid. (Kawther)

A visit, which was usually for Kawther once a month, meant leaving home in Sousse at dawn in order to join the queue at the prison gate by around 9am or later, depending how distant was the prison. Each visitor carried a package of food for their relative, known as the '*couffin*', or basket, which the prisoners depended on to augment the poor quality food

provided by the prison authorities. The *couffin* was subject to its own arbitrary controls. Pens and paper were forbidden, as were certain types of food, including *mulūkhiyya* stew and ʿ*uṣbān*, a Tunisian style haggis.[35] Some prison guards insisted that fruit should be delivered already peeled so it would not last (Solidarité Tunisienne 2003). On other occasions the deposit of the *couffin* was restricted to the day after the visit, in order to force visiting relatives to stay overnight in the nearby town or abandon the visit altogether. The wait to deposit the *couffin* could be several hours, and in this time there was again the chance to pass on news of other members of the movement and to offer support to those struggling to manage their lives. Most of these women, with their husbands in jail, were now responsible for financially supporting the family through poorly paid menial work, as well as paying for the food and travel involved in a prison visit. The mutual support during the visits was a rare moment of encouragement but also reshaped individual views about the rights of single mothers and the role of women in the workplace. The experience of being financially responsible for their families later encouraged Nahdawi women in the post-2011 transition to take a 'practical stance' on women's rights, notably endorsing the Personal Status Code, defending women's rights in the workplace, and taking on leadership roles in commissions within the constituent assembly, a stance some have likened to that of women in Europe after the Second World War (Gray 2012, 292).[36] After the long discussions in the queue came the actual moment of the visit, which was brief and anticlimactic. As Kawther described it:

> You were already really exhausted and then there was the visit but you just had a short moment to ask: 'How are you?' And then that was all. And it was done through a metal grill at first, and then through a telephone handset, and we spoke

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[35] *Mulūkhiyya* is a slow-cooked stew eaten across the region and made with green jute leaves. ʿ*Uṣbān* is a North African sausage made with rice, herbs and lamb.

[36] However, this practical stance did not extend to endorsing single motherhood. Senior female al-Nahda leaders argued they would discourage women from considering life as a single mother a personal choice because the movement sought to prioritise the family unit over the individual (Gray 2012, 298).

> just a couple of words, a minute or two, no more. Just to check he was still there and alive. And there was a guard on either side listening to what we said . . . Once in the prison in Messadine, my husband was there, and I said: 'There is news from Algeria about Bouteflika'. Suddenly the guard stopped me. It was forbidden. You spent the whole day in a queue just to say: 'How are you?' (Kawther)

The prison regime was particularly effective at circumscribing the precise moment of encounter between visitors and prisoners, but it failed to see the opportunities for collective dissent that remained hidden within its systems of control.

The visits brought solace to the prisoners, but they offered more to the visitors themselves. The challenge of travelling often long distances to prisons across the country, sometimes only to find a relative had been transferred unannounced to another prison elsewhere, was oppressive. Yet, the encounter at the prison gates brought the visiting women a chance to gather to bond together week after week.

Conclusion

This chapter has recovered accounts of the prison experiences of al-Nahda, a narrative rarely told, to demonstrate the nature of carceral repression and the resilience it produced. During the 1990s, it appeared to most scholars that the movement had disappeared inside Tunisia and survived only in exile, or that 'for all practical purposes, Nahda had become an offshore operation sustained by supporters in Europe and North America', as one put it (Alexander 1997, 35). Indeed, it seemed that within Tunisia 'what remained of the Islamist movement was decapitated and fragmented' (Murphy 1999, 199). Several years later in the wake of the 2011 uprising, much attention was paid to the movement's 'political theatre' of victimhood drawn from the repression its members suffered in the 1990s (Usher 2011). Yet between the movement's onshore disappearance and its post-2011 narrative of historic victimhood, lies the reality of a long prison experience. The accounts of individual Nahdawis, men and women, reveal the extent of the complex regime of coercion, with punishments ranging from physical beatings to humiliation, isolation, and exclusion. Yet

they also show how within a few years of the crackdown against al-Nahda, individuals began to resist in different forms. There were long private debates, evaluating the movement's past, but in a way that did not divide but rather re-bound individuals together in a collective project even at their most vulnerable moment. Ironically, it was to prove easier to hold such discussions within the prison walls than it would be in later years when prisoners returned to their homes only to face the more difficult challenge of social exclusion. Along with the debates came acts of physical resistance, ranging from hunger strikes to moments of intense study that produced unexpected sensations of contentment. Regular visits from families, mostly mothers, wives, and sisters, offered some succour to the prisoners but more importantly another layer of re-association for the broader al-Nahda community.

However, the prison experience also revealed how awkward had become the relationship within the movement between political ambition on the one hand and cultural, social or religious objectives on the other. There were significant disagreements among the prisoners about the strategy adopted by the movement during and after the 1989 elections, and about the nature of the confrontation with the regime. In exile, there was an explicit acknowledgement that political ambitions had overwhelmed other elements of the Islamist project. This period of strategic review exposed the challenge of pursuing the 'comprehensive' conception of Islam, first proposed at the 1981 press conference. Though the ambiguities of the project became evident as a result of this prison evaluation, they were by no means resolved. While the review in exile directed the movement away from its political goals for strategic reasons, in Tunisia the reality of repression within and without the prison walls meant formal political work was all but impossible in the 1990s. The direct experience of repression meant many as individuals grew wary of the cost of political ambition. When Nahdawis returned home from prison, they encountered a social

exclusion that was often even more repressive than incarceration and so they continued to reconsider for themselves what shape the Islamist project should take.

5 Beyond 'Social Death': Strategies of Survival

> When we left prison we were in a bigger prison. Meaning what? You were not free with your time. You were restricted. It's true that you'd left the worst of prison, but personally in the morning at 8am I had to go to the police station in Kalaa Kebira and sign, and in the evening too. Also twice a week I had to sign at the National Guard station and at the regional police station in Sousse. You weren't in charge of your time . . . Even people that I knew, neighbours, people who sympathised with you, they wouldn't dare speak to you. They passed in front of you but couldn't speak to you. Why? Because they thought they would be arrested and taken to the police station and interrogated. That was the most severe punishment.
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> *Hamza, an al-Nahda member from Kalaa Kebira, imprisoned in 1991-1993. Unable to return to his job in a private topography firm, he worked as a waiter for many years before finding work in a tourism company.*

The architecture of repression imposed on the al-Nahda movement endured well beyond the prison experience. Some Nahdawis, like this Kalaa Kebira activist, faced relatively brief jail terms and left prison in the 1990s; others returned home in later years when their sentences were completed or thanks to a series of amnesties beginning in 1999.[37] Though ostensibly free, they were deprived of their independence, isolated from the community, and humiliated by arbitrary police raids, interrogations, arrests, and enforced daily reporting at police stations. They were effectively ostracised from political, economic, and social life. This chapter draws on the experiences of individual Nahdawis to explore this long post-prison episode, which ran through the 2000s until the uprising in 2011. Rather than endorsing the received scholarly understanding of the movement as a defeated, passive recipient of all-pervasive state repression, these accounts instead reveal a complex web of survival, individual and collective resilience, ideological reorientation, and strategic debate.

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[37] Around 400-500 prisoners were released early in 1999, including many Nahdawis. Other early releases followed in November 2004, when two senior leaders Ali Laarayedh and Ziad Doulatli were freed, and in November 2005, and February 2006 (Barrouhi 2006).

For the small group of activists in Sousse who were still bold enough to be concerned with political parties or human rights groups at the turn of the millennium, it seemed al-Nahda had almost entirely disappeared. One former head of the Sousse branch of the Tunisian Human Rights League (al-Rabita al-Tunisiyya li-l-Difaʿ ʿan Huquq al-Insan, LTDH), a focal point for the activist community, described the gradual reappearance of a pro-democracy movement in the city in the early 2000s, but said Nahdawis were nowhere to be seen: 'Al-Nahda moved against Ben Ali and then exported its activities abroad and the movement played no role in life here or in the regions' (Lagha). Another Sousse activist, a long-time member of the PCOT, said the local al-Nahda leadership remained absent until the uprising: 'In fact we only knew the al-Nahda leadership here after 14 January 2011. The democrats we met them at the UGTT for strikes or in the LTDH but the Islamists weren't ever there' (Labidi). Al-Nahda was dismissed as a movement only in exile, whose former loyalists in Sousse were repressed, inactive, and silent.

This became a view reflected more widely in the literature about Tunisian politics in the 2000s. Salwa Ismail, writing in 2006, talked of the story of Islamism in Tunisia appearing 'complete':

> The movement is thought to be at an end . . . The expansion and multiplication of mechanisms of control and incorporation has served to neutralise Islamist opposition and to suppress other forms of independent activism. (Ismail 2006b, 138, 159)

In the view of Hibou, the regime deployed a complex web of control, which extinguished the Islamists not just as a political force but even as individuals:

> Having come into close contact with physical death, they experience, outside prison, what they themselves call a 'social death' that is often even less bearable: the extreme difficulty, or even the near-impossibility, of having a social or even a private life. (Hibou 2011, 6)

As an expression of an individual and collective project, al-Nahda appeared spent.

This chapter, however, looks beyond the narrative of 'social death' to ask what happened to individual Islamists who returned home from jail in these years and what it meant to be Islamist when it seemed no longer possible to be so. From their own accounts it is clear, first, that some Nahdawis in Sousse were resilient and that this resilience affected their understanding of the Islamist political project. The effort required to survive, both materially and psychologically, plunged these men and women into unfamiliar surroundings, new workplaces, and a new, inferior social status. Some struggled, others prospered, all were forced to rethink what their Islamist belonging meant to them as individuals. Second, unlike Islamist movements elsewhere in the region, there was relatively little involvement in this period in social and charitable work. The associational work that did take place often involved those on the movement's periphery, who were on the fringes both in terms of their position in the hierarchy and their ideas. They pulled the movement in new directions. Third, though the movement was more resilient than it seemed, this resilience exposed the fault lines within al-Nahda. I argue that the primary tension in the movement was not between the reductively labelled 'moderates' and 'conservatives', or between those inside Tunisia and those exiled abroad, but between the movement's political and *da'wa* dimensions. The relationship between politics and preaching produced a particularly acute internal debate after 2011, but the traces of this tension date back to the movement's earlier history. The period of the 2000s saw the movement under pressure and disaggregated into its diverse components. Here we find movement sympathisers who enjoyed a wider freedom of movement and broader political vision than more senior leadership figures, young men and women who were becoming drawn to Islamism in a personal spiritual quest, and the rump leadership, who focused almost entirely on a political survival strategy. In this decade of repression, with the many

internal tensions, debates, and challenges it provoked within al-Nahda, the fault lines of the tension between the different projects of the 'comprehensive' vision stand out.

5.1 Navigating the 'bigger prison'

By the early 2000s the Ben Ali regime had dampened all significant political competition from opposition parties. The early promise of new political freedoms after the 1987 coup had faded into the reality of a 'façade democracy' (Sadiki 2002, 137). Not only did Ben Ali amend the constitution in 2002 to allow a return to the Bourguiban-style president-for-life that he had once pledged to abolish, but the ruling party, trade unions, and loyal opposition were on hand to endorse his candidacy as president once again in 2004. While al-Nahda and the PCOT remained unauthorised, other opposition parties were allotted a quota of 19 seats in the 1994 parliament and 34 in 1999 (out of a total 182), despite their tiny share of the vote. Ben Ali's constant 'reform' served as an effective method of control and coercion (Hibou 2011, 213-66). Economic growth only reinforced his position as gross domestic product more than trebled between 1986 and 1999 (Sadiki 2002, 126). It was into this landscape, with Ben Ali's position secure, that Nahdawis began to walk free from jail in the early 2000s.

Though the prison experience was hard, the period after jail was commonly considered harder still, with its twin pressures of isolating individuals from their community and diminishing their social status. Once a prisoner returned home he or she was subject to a period of administrative control (*murāqaba idāriyya*), theoretically included as part of the initial prison sentence, although sometimes arbitrarily imposed or extended. Administrative control could run for up to ten years, according to the penal code (Article 26) (Republic of Tunisia 1966). The state had the right to decide where ex-prisoners would live (Article 23), and to ban them from certain professions, including as a lawyer, public official, doctor, vet, midwife, and employee at a school or university

(Article 5).[38] Nahdawis had to report regularly to local and regional police stations as well as National Guard offices, where at the appointed hour they had to sign their names in a notebook, which they themselves had to buy. This was accompanied by routine humiliation as well as repeated interrogation about sources of income, new employers, and daily life, often beginning in pseudo-familiarity: 'What's new?' (*shnuwa jdīd?*). Police officers raided houses day and night, searching homes for incriminating books, newspapers, or political pamphlets.

Nahdawis soon found themselves socially ostracised. Marriage, in particular, came to symbolise this isolation. In the 1980s weddings had been an opportunity for the movement to strengthen social bonds and to articulate new religious and cultural expressions. Now several men described how after prison they struggled to find a bride, which left them outside the social norms of their communities and intensified their despair. Rachid, the frequent hunger striker, was freed in 2002, but was unable to return to his job as a school maths teacher. His sister and son-in-law collected him from the prison gates brought him back to their house in Hai Riadh, where for the first time since his arrest in 1991 he saw his elder brother, a secular senior government bureaucrat who had not visited him in prison. They drove together to the family house in the village of Chorbane, south of the city, and grilled a lamb. However, few neighbours attended the celebration; even some of his nephews did not dare appear. Some months later Rachid began working as a private maths tutor, visiting pupils in their homes, but he remained single. 'I looked for someone to marry but I was refused frequently. I came from a known family but there were lots of refusals. They said: "We're not refusing you, but your cause"' (Rachid). Eventually in

[38] The Tunisian penal code was introduced in July 1913 during the French protectorate, then modified by decree in November 1956 (Republic of Tunisia 1956), following independence, and revised over subsequent years. In terms of the articles relevant here: article 23 was always present in the law while articles 5 and 26 were introduced under Bourguiba in 1966 (Republic of Tunisia 1966).

2004, at the age of forty-four, he was engaged to a woman he had met as a student in the 1980s. Her father, a farmer, was a graduate of Zaytuna, a sign of shared religious commitment. 'He was looking for the right sort,' Rachid said. The celebration, however, was modest.

> When I did get married there was just a small attendance in the countryside at the wedding. Usually they have hundreds of guests but we just had the closest of relatives. People were afraid. Even my son-in-law, who is very close to me, didn't come. That was hard.

Most Nahdawis stayed away from their local mosque, fearful of police interrogations, and either prayed at home or stayed conspicuously at work on a Friday lunchtime. Not surprisingly some despaired of the movement's future. One local member from Kalaa Seghira said: 'We told ourselves that it was done with al-Nahda, adieu to al-Nahda, there is no more movement' (Hafedh). The effect of this programme of restrictions was to isolate them not just from society but to make them question their own convictions too, to 'alienate us from ourselves,' as one put it (Bechir).

Beyond this arbitrary punishment, there was pressure on social status. Administrative control made it hard to find work. Former teachers and civil servants could not return to their jobs, and the regular signing requirements deterred employers from taking them on. Doctors set up private clinics, but others found themselves resorting to menial jobs, working among the rough traders in the Sunday market, on the poorer southern side of the city. It was an uncomfortable reversal: those who had once held high social status within the Islamist community and who had been the first in their families to attend university were now reduced to the humiliation of penury. Salah Nouir, a Consultative Council member, who had studied at the Lycée de Garçons and then the Sorbonne, had been banned from his job as a French-language teacher since 1981. When he left jail in 1995, aged forty-five, he could only find work selling sweets from the back

of a bicycle in the market. He signed twice daily at the local police station and once a week at the National Guard headquarters. At first he tried to disguise his identity:

> At first, people didn't know me. But here in our country people want to know all about you: Where do you come from? What did you do before this work? I lied and said I was a truck driver but they didn't believe me, and they began to understand the story. And then they started to avoid me. They were afraid when they spoke to me. We were completely isolated. Even from our parents, even my brothers, my uncles, my cousins. Everyone was afraid, because if someone knocked on my door he would be summoned by the police. (Nouir)

He was not the only Nahdawi in the Sunday market. Alongside him was his cousin Ali Nouir, the prominent preacher. He had a stall selling clothes in the market before his death in 2000. Some suggested they fared better in the market than other stallholders because they were more honest with their customers, but none prospered during this period and all regarded it as a long indignity.

However, there were opportunities for resilience. If administrative control was intended to isolate Nahdawis from their fellow activists, then the most obvious resistance was to gather together in defiance. This happened rather infrequently, until the late 2000s where, as we will see, there were new opportunities for private meetings. Yet, although marriages had become a reminder of isolation, there were some rare exceptions. Many Nahdawis attended the wedding in November 2006 of a daughter of Hamadi Jebali, the senior Sousse leader who had been freed from jail earlier that year and who was now leading the movement inside Tunisia. It was a rare and brief opportunity for them to revive what one called their kinship (*luḥma*). The police tried to prevent the wedding from taking place at all. Murad, the son of a local bank clerk, was a friend of the groom but not yet a member of the movement. He arrived at the marriage hall dressed in a smart suit.

> But in the hall I found nothing. It wasn't like a party, and there were no cars, there was nothing. What was happening? I was in a taxi. I got out and I saw the police in civilian clothes. The marriage hall was upstairs with a cafe downstairs and the hall was lit up and I saw the lights. So I entered into the cafe and I said: 'Isn't there a marriage upstairs?' and they said: 'No there's nothing.' The police were watching me. (Murad)

Murad called his friend the groom, who told him they had had to move the celebrations to his family house to avoid the police restrictions. The police not only closed the marriage hall, but also took the names of those trying to attend and recorded their car licence plates, and then closed the streets leading to the family house, preventing the musicians and caterer from reaching the party (Julliard and Smouni 2006). Nonetheless Murad found his way there, and suddenly emerged into the bosom of the reclusive al-Nahda community:

> I knew almost no one and I knew that the people there would be mistrustful and had the right to be mistrustful. 'Who would welcome me?' I wondered. And then as I came in someone came to me and greeted me and he was smiling and he brought me in and it was Mr Hamadi. I've never forgotten. I entered into al-Nahda by way of the big leaders, not just anyone . . . It was a party with lots of people and yet look how he welcomed me. He saw me hesitate and he came to greet me as if we'd known each other for years; not at all distrustful even though he should have been . . .
>
> Someone said to me: 'Are you al-Nahda?' I said: 'No', but then they told me stories about their experiences. The groom said to me: 'I have friends who I thought were my friends but they didn't come. But you came, even in this climate!' I saw it as a normal thing to do but really the embargo Ben Ali put on them, even on their families, it was horrible to live through. Everyone was avoiding them.

He later went on to marry Jebali's second daughter and to become an al-Nahda member himself.

There was a shift from public sector jobs to the private sector: many former teachers or civil servants now ran modest market stalls or bookshops or groceries. They were forced into entrepreneurial work in a country that valued more highly the social status and stability of government employment, which was known, in a Tunisian saying, as being as solid as 'a nail in the wall' (*mismār fī ḥāʾiṭ*).[39] However, there were a number of ways of navigating these obstacles, or, in Eric Hobsbawm's words, of '"working the system" . . . to [their] minimum disadvantage' (2008, 13). Foreign-owned companies, for example, were

[39] Public sector work in Tunisia made up 59.1 percent of all formal employment, although the private informal sector made up nearly two-thirds of overall employment (Gatti et al. 2013, 148).

more open to recruiting former prisoners and accommodating their regular police station visits. With its large port, Sousse had become an important centre for exports and several foreign companies had taken advantage of the tax discounts offered in 1972 to set up factories in industrial zones in southern Sousse and further south. Thirty years later, the city's Islamists became unexpected beneficiaries of this policy. In prison Hafedh, an engineer and activist from Kalaa Seghira, had befriended a Frenchman who later found him work repairing machinery in a French factory in Sousse:

> It was as if it came from heaven . . . I told my employer I had problems of having to sign but he saw me working and that I was capable and he had confidence in me. He said: 'There are twenty-four hours in the day: come when you want and leave when you want, just give me eight hours of work' . . . I discovered the regime didn't have control over foreign companies, they couldn't tell them not to employ this or that person. (Hafedh)

Another company, Leoni, a cable-manufacturer headquartered in Nuremberg, Germany, played a particularly important role. The firm had a factory in an industrial zone in Messadine, south of Sousse, operated by Leoni Tunisie, a firm headed during this period by Mohamed Larbi Rouis, an al-Nahda sympathiser from a prominent religious family in nearby M'saken. Rouis' father had been a Zaytuna-educated cleric and his brother, Jaleleddine, sat in al-Nahda's Consultative Council and had headed the movement's electoral list in Sousse for the 1989 elections. Leoni became a protected source of employment for Islamists. The head of the local al-Nahda bureau in Kalaa Seghira after the 2011 uprising, a former schoolteacher, had worked at Leoni in Messadine for six and a half years after leaving prison. Another al-Nahda activist from Sousse, who was prominent in training young Islamists in secret, worked at Leoni from 2007 as an accountant. Another employee working in human resources since 2004 was one of Jebali's daughters (Ould Mammar 2012).

It would be wrong to exaggerate or romanticise resilience against the punishing weight of administrative control. For while some Nahdawis in Sousse navigated around the

restrictions, many were suffocated by the weight of repression: several admitted giving up hope that their movement would ever return and seemed reconciled to a life of poverty and social exclusion. For others, the commitment to an ordinary life, whether through marriage and a family or the constant search for secure employment, was their own challenge, their own mundane but self-affirming act of what Scott called 'prosaic but constant struggle' (1985, 29). Moreover, behind the individual acts they also held tenaciously to their religious belief and their idea of the Islamist project.

5.2 'Living Islam in our daily lives'

The post-prison experience was not merely about enduring regime controls. It also forced Nahdawis to reassess what it meant for them to be Islamists when it was no longer possible to mobilise for a broader political project. Stripped of the political, the meaning ascribed to being Islamist became closer to what it had been in the 1970s: an emphasis on morality and correct comportment in line with religious commitments like prayer and fasting, but this time as individuals in the privacy of their home or workplace, rather than in groups in the public space of the mosque. Where in the 1970s and 1980s there had been overt community building among the likeminded, now that became a brotherhood that was more imaginary than realisable. What they clung to was a diluted, individualised remnant of the subcultural community forged in earlier years. Hamza, the Kalaa Kebira activist, said:

> We were brothers before God. Even when we didn't talk together they stayed present in our hearts. I was sympathising with the conditions of the others and I really wanted to be with other political prisoners but I assessed our conditions and I stayed far away. (Hamza)

Another Nahdawi, a preacher and Consultative Council member who worked in cheap restaurants during the 1990s and 2000s, put it in similar terms, emphasising personal commitment:

> Q: What did it mean to be Islamist at that time?

> A: This is the value of being an Islamist in very suffocating conditions: To be Islamist in these conditions the minimum is to preserve Islamic ethics, to preserve trust in God, to preserve the Islamic project which will be victorious and it's enough for you to do your prayers, to do your fasting, to have successful relations with people. It's enough that you have unwavering convictions to trust in. This is how it is to be an Islamist. You don't have any other choice. (Kamel)

This was more than retrospective rationalisation. These were religiously committed men and women who had been punished for their political beliefs and who were now trying to find resilience in their Islamic reference during a long period of hardship.

This sense of a moral code emerges not just in the private thoughts of individuals, but also in their understanding of their approach to business. Several emphasised the moral rationale behind private-sector commerce, which they believed distinguished them from other shopkeepers and businessmen. Youssef, formerly a teacher from Hammam Sousse, began working in construction after his prison term and eventually obtained his own licence to run a small firm of builders. He identified a religiously-inspired value system as the backbone of his success: honesty towards his employees and clients, arriving at work on time, completing projects when promised, and paying his staff promptly and equitably. It was what he called 'living Islam in our daily lives.'

> Q: At that time what was the role of religion in your life?
>
> A: For me, religion was a personal issue. I retained my religious convictions and commitments. For those who belong to the al-Nahda movement, religion was the embodiment of religious values, living religion in your values, the Islamic values, that is what was important. So we lived Islam in our daily lives. The most important thing for us was reflecting religion in your daily behaviour, in your daily transactions, in your work, that was the important thing, a long way from the folklore side, like beards and so on. That's not important. (Youssef)

Youssef's assessment of that period was not one of hardship, although there were occasional problems with the security forces, not least because he lived and worked in Ben Ali's hometown. Instead, he said of his construction work: 'Really, it was a positive experience for me. It was excellent.' This sense of an ethical advantage recurred frequently in accounts of this period. Another Nahdawi, for example, spoke of those selling cheap

goods at market stalls as drawing on their 'stock' (*raṣīd*) of religious morals in governing how they dealt with customers (Nabil). Separately, the al-Nahda leadership was gradually embracing a market economy which became explicit after 2011, a path well-trodden by other Islamist movements (Moore and Springborg 2001, 225-6). However, these Sousse accounts do not quite align with the religiously affirmed 'theology of prosperity' identified by Patrick Haenni as indicative of an evolving Islamism (2005, 10-11). Instead, the emphasis here was on morality as an advantage, rather than an explicit religious endorsement of capitalist prosperity. Moreover, among Nahdawis in Sousse, the shift from public to private sector employment did not last. After 2011 many took advantage of the general amnesty for former political prisoners and returned to work as teachers or in the administration. The amnesty of 19 February 2011 allowed those convicted of a range of political, trade union and associational crimes (as well as violations of internal security and the press code, and certain public order offences) not only to be amnestied of their convictions and sentences, but also to reintegrate in their former jobs and to claim compensation (Republic of Tunisia 2011).[40] Youssef, for example, gave up his construction business to return to work as a schoolteacher. Many others also found returning to work as a teacher or civil servant more attractive in terms of status and job security than continuing with their small businesses.

The bigger puzzle, however, is why Nahdawis did not take more advantage of the society-wide return to personal religiosity that marked the 2000s. This religious revival, a familiar region-wide pattern, was fuelled in part by a response to the West's reaction to the attacks of 11 September 2001, with wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, but also by the increasing availability from the late 1990s of satellite television channels. Nahdawis in

[40] Law 2012-4 of 22 June 2012 specified that anyone benefitting from the amnesty (or failing that one member of their family) would be directly recruited into the public sector without passing through written or oral exams (Republic of Tunisia 2012).

Sousse spoke of watching al-Jazeera (launched in 1996 with Qatari funding), Iqraa TV (a channel of religious and social programming set up in 1998 by a Saudi businessman), and later al-Resalah (Saudi-funded and broadcast from Cairo since 2006) and al-Hiwar (established in London in 2006 by Azzam Tamimi, who had close contact with Ghannouchi in exile). One element of this wave of religiosity was the emergence of Qurʾanic study groups, which responded to growing demands for knowledge about religious tradition and discomfort at growing consumerism and corruption (Haugbølle and Cavatorta 2012a, 22-24; Haugbølle 2015). These associations received a surprising official protection thanks to the launch in 2007 of Radio Zitouna, a religious channel owned by Ben Ali's son-in-law Sakher al-Materi, which aired Qurʾanic discussion programmes.[41] Although nominally secular, the Ben Ali regime in fact deployed an array of techniques, from security controls to information dominance and symbolic production, in the hope of expanding its control over the religious sphere. Similarly, other regimes including Egypt, for example, also extended their presence in the religious sphere. Yet, such efforts have been shown to not always bring a regime social control but instead to generate challenges from other actors and to increase an appetite for religious resources (Starrett 1998, 4-20).

One al-Nahda activist and former prisoner, Chokri, set up a small Qurʾanic association in his home in the old city of Hammam Sousse in 2005. The work began discreetly, with small groups of mostly boys and girls meeting on Fridays and Saturdays for classes led by Chokri and his sister. The initial emphasis was on correct behaviour and family life.

> The goal was to educate children in the old city at first: how to bring up children so they don't use vulgar words. Women came to give classes to the mothers about

[41] The channel began in villa in Carthage, a wealthy area of Tunis near the presidential palace, and broadcast, often in Tunisian dialect, programmes on Qurʾanic interpretation, the hadith, and living as a good Muslim. Al-Materi's radio station was soon followed by al-Zitouna television channel in 2009 and an Islamic bank in 2010 (Haugbølle and Cavatorta 2012b, 104).

> how to raise children and we brought an expert to speak on marital relations. (Chokri)

Chokri also invited some of the preachers within al-Nahda in Sousse to give talks in private. His small association offered a different style of learning to the staid and poorly attended state-run Qurʾanic centre in Sousse. Chokri's goal was a return to the non-political ethic of the movement in the 1970s and 1980s, which focused on creating a cultural alternative, an Islamic subculture:

> For many people, learning the Qurʾan was about having a shaykh with a stick who would beat you if you made a mistake. But we didn't do it like that. We did it gently and we tried to offer a community. We went to the beach together, we did sports, we organised outings, and we did cultural events. We tried to create a certain ambiance and there was no extremist dimension. People still think religion is just going to the mosque and praying, but it's more than that. It's our whole life. (Chokri)

His association survived until the uprising of 2011 and then expanded rapidly. During the repression of the 2000s, these studies offered a rare breathing space for members of the movement. Sayida, a middle-aged Nahdawi from Akouda who worked during the week in Tunis, attended a Qurʾanic class in the capital. She worked in a law office and began wearing a hijab again, but was careful not to discuss her religious belief at work, even though she felt the environment around her relaxing. In her view Radio Zitouna offered a chance for Nahdawis to renew friendships again.

> There was a margin of freedom and this is why we profited from this freedom to meet, to rebuild ourselves anew. The idea spread again, especially among those who had gone for years without any meeting, the older ones. (Sayida)

However, among Sousse activists these examples were more the exception than the rule. Remarkably few Nahdawis spoke of participating in such study groups. The repressive effect of prison and the administrative control experience seems to have been most responsible in deterring them from any risky endeavours. For most, their religious conviction remained private.

More than this, older al-Nahda members showed some disdain towards this religious revival, particularly the return of hijab. The new style of dress became suddenly popular in large cities and was explained at the time as a search for identity and as a response to the Afghan and Iraq wars (Ghorbal 2003; Geisser and Gobe 2007b) or as popular among a new upper-middle class looking to express themselves in a consumer society (Haugbølle 2015, 329-330). The regime endeavoured to curb the popularity of the veil and in 2006 launched a new campaign against the headscarf, which the Minister for Religious Affairs, Boubaker al-Akhzouri, described as 'un-Islamic', 'unpatriotic', and an 'imported' concept ("Wazir al-Shuʾun al-Diniyya" 2006). However, this failed to stifle what was fast becoming a widespread phenomenon. Yet rather than celebrate the new presence of the hijab, many al-Nahda women instead saw it as symptomatic of a superficial religious understanding. In the 1980s, in the view of many women in the movement, the hijab had signified both a political affiliation and an ethical commitment. As Sayida, the Nahdawi from Akouda, said:

> In the 1970s and 1980s there was a hijab that meant political belonging, of belief and of a message, the idea of the Islamic Tendency Movement. Ninety per cent of those wearing the hijab belonged to that project—the idea that Islam could solve the problems of the contemporary world and that reviving Islam was like a method of life, a model of life in all fields. Perhaps if you met a woman in the street wearing hijab and you didn't know her you would say: '*al-salām ʿalaykum*.' (Sayida)

However, she said, the hijab that re-emerged in the early 2000s was worn by most women in a different manner, 'without conditions or any political engagement or awareness'. The new attention to the hijab, in her view, lacked the particular set of practices and beliefs of the al-Nahda project.

> They were wearing hijab and they didn't even pray . . . The new generation they were not like we were. Sometimes they had ideas totally against ours: they wore the hijab but their minds were interested in other things and even they went to the nightclubs. You never imagined finding a girl in the nightclub dancing and wearing hijab.

Another female al-Nahda activist, Kawther, who was a schoolteacher in Hai Riadh, said the widespread appearance of the hijab on the streets in the late 2000s gave her sufficient protection to wear it herself at work. However, she lamented the lack of religious understanding that accompanied it:

> It's only a worn as decoration. It doesn't have any value to these women. It's not worn as a duty, no . . . Now the veil (*khimar*) in Tunisia is just an article of clothing that's very ordinary. It's decoration. (Kawther)

For these women, the hijab they saw proliferating in society was merely an identity claim and had lost its purpose as both a political signifier and a means of achieving an ethical life.

In her research in mid-1990s Egypt, Saba Mahmood shows that acts like fasting or wearing the hijab can be considered by women not merely as identity markers but as a way to cultivate the virtue of modesty (2005, 50-51), mirroring the disciplined formation of the Christian self in the monasteries of the early Middle Ages (Asad 1993, 62). Yet the interpretations drawn by these Nahdawi women themselves complicates Mahmood's distinction between Islamist activists, who she argues tended to see the veil as a sign of the vitality of an Islamic revival, and members of piety circles, who instead saw the veil as a way to achieve modesty from the outside in, through the 'training and realization of a pious self' (2005, 51). In the different context of Tunisia in the 2000s, when formal Islamist activism was largely impossible, the women of al-Nahda adopted a much more ethical view of the hijab that came closer to that of the Egyptian women training themselves in piety circles. The Nahdawi understanding of the wearing of the veil was as both a political and an ethical act, which led them to a dismissive disappointment in those Tunisian women who they felt wore the veil as purely an identity symbol.

Understandings of what it meant to be Islamist in these straitened circumstances focused on the private and the moral, rediscovering a certain ethical comportment and

renouncing for the long term the more ambitious political project. Nahdawis went back to the meanings present at the movement's origins, which prioritised the moral condition. These understandings were reflected in the moral work ethic for those fortunate enough to find jobs. Yet, the understandings also retained a particular interpretation and history, which left them out of tune with the satellite preacher-led religious revival of the 2000s.

5.3 Recruiting the next generation

Perhaps the most unexpected activities of the al-Nahda movement in this period emerged among the younger generation who began to discover and study Islamist ideas for themselves. In Sousse this was a small but significant group: some were the sons and daughters of Nahdawis (the 'children of the movement', *abnāʾ al-ḥaraka*), but surprisingly some were new to al-Nahda. They were influenced by events abroad, notably the 11 September 2001 attacks and the March 2003 invasion of Iraq, as well as growing religiosity at home, and were encouraged by what they could read on the internet or the religious programming they watched on satellite television. Their focus was not on al-Nahda or its political project but instead the search for a new religious authority, constructed through the internet and satellite channels and which offered an antidote to the self-serving official Islam relayed through the state media and the mosques.

Two different paths into the movement illustrate the absorption of the new generation. The first is perhaps the more anticipated. Nejib was the son of a daily labourer and grew up in a small village on the road west from Sousse to Kairouan. He was sixteen at the time of the 11 September attacks. Neijb learnt about Islam and the Qurʾan from an uncle, who had been in the Tabligh preaching movement and who gave him books to read on fiqh, the hadith, and various Qurʾanic commentaries. He joined a local Qurʾanic study group, the Association for the Preservation of the Holy Qurʾan (Jamiyyat al-Muhafizaʿala al-Qurʾan al-Karim) in M'saken, which was indirectly connected to the al-Nahda

movement: it was led by Shaykh Mohamed Tahar Rouis, a local imam who was the father of Jaleleddine Rouis, head of the al-Nahda list in the 1989 elections, and Mohamed Larbi Rouis, the sympathetic director of the Leoni manufacturing company. Nejib took part in competitions of commentary, memorisation, and rhetoric, though this was always under the gaze of the political police. 'I remember I was in Tunis for a Qurʾanic competition at the Ministry for Religious Affairs. There were more security officials than competitors!' he said. Despite the Rouis family connection, Nejib described his belonging (*intimāʾ*) to the Islamist movement as an individual, personal search led by his Qurʾanic studies and reading. He became known in his village as someone to call on for Qurʾanic recitation during social occasions like engagements or funerals, though he was forbidden from preaching in the village mosque. He described his strong personal reaction against the 'official Islam' of the regime that appeared on television, in newspapers, and in the Friday sermons at the mosque.

> The official Islam was the Islam that expressed the options of the regime, a contradictory Islam and you felt it was an affected model just to silence people. It justified the choices of the regime but at the same time it was at war against the Islamic awakening (*ṣaḥwa*), and even freedom of religion and of belief, and it fought against the simplest form of religiosity, whether the beard or the hijab. And that was what put you off official institutions . . . I began to differentiate myself from many of my friends and peers. (Nejib)

After the revolution he moved quickly to join al-Nahda at university in Sousse and then rose up the regional leadership structure.

The second path, which also brought a young teenager into the al-Nahda fold, began independently of the movement. Faouzi, from Kalaa Seghira, was inspired by watching the Egyptian preacher Amr Khalid on satellite television and fell in with a group of Salafists while studying at the Higher Institute of Management of Sousse.[42] They sought

[42] Amr Khalid was the best known of a new generation of lay preachers in Egypt, who in television broadcasts from 1999 offered what Bayat described as 'an active piety which is thick in rituals and scriptures and thin in politics' (2002).

to spread their *daʿwa* and implicit in this was a direct challenge to the legitimacy of the Ben Ali regime: 'Of course when we talked about Arab-Islamic identity we must talk about who is blocking and preventing these freedoms' (Faouzi). They were arrested in a nationwide crackdown on extremism that began with the December 2003 anti-terrorism law, with its overly broad definitions of terrorist offences.[43] Faouzi was jailed in 2004 for five months and was then excluded from the university. Eventually in the late 2000s, he made contact in his neighbourhood with a Nahdawi and the movement carefully drew him in, encouraging him to reconsider his earlier Salafism. By 2014 he was head of the al-Nahda youth section for Sousse and a member of the movement's regional bureau and had married the daughter of a senior al-Nahda leader.

The chains of transmission of ideas involved in recruiting Faouzi are striking. In meetings with the Nahdawi in his neighbourhood, he was initially told about the movement and its experience of repression, much of which had happened when Faouzi was a small child. Eventually he was brought to a secret meeting with Moncef Ben Salem, a maths professor and senior leader in the movement from Sfax.[44] It was an important moment:

> I thought it was impossible to meet someone like this and then there he was in front of me. He gave me great moral encouragement. Even though he was an old man he was still talking about working for freedom. (Faouzi)

From that point, Faouzi was drawn into small study groups of young al-Nahda sympathisers, who were meeting sometimes in private homes, sometimes in the main public library in central Sousse, and sometimes in rented summer houses by the beach. One key guide for them was Nouri, another activist from Sousse who was a maths student

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[43] The anti-terrorism law (Republic of Tunisia 2003) followed an al-Qaʿida attack on a synagogue in Djerba in 2002 that left twenty-one people dead. Around 3,000 people were believed to have been arrested under the new law, often for such crimes as growing beards, wearing particular clothing, consulting prohibited internet sites or 'disturbing public order' (Human Rights Watch 2011, 42-3; Scheinin 2012, 7-8).

[44] Moncef Ben Salem (1953-2015) was an academic who taught maths in Tunisia and abroad and who was imprisoned in 1987-89 and in 1990-93. He went on to be minister of higher education in the first al-Nahda government.

in Tunis and slightly older and better acquainted with Islamist readings. He was the son of an al-Nahda prisoner who had died in 1998 shortly after being released from jail. From 2006 Nouri ran the youth committee in the al-Jahiz forum organised by Slaheddine Jourchi in Tunis, a rare and influential intellectual discussion group which met regularly on Saturday mornings to discuss subjects that were virtually taboo for public debate: notions of consultation (*shūrā*), criticisms of dictatorship, and ideas about democracy.[45] Nouri then tried to recreate a similar intellectual atmosphere of discussion among young Sousse activists, though with a focus that was more explicitly Islamist than the Tunis forum. It was a struggle given the sterile absence of political and cultural debate among the younger generation, a climate he and others frequently described as 'desertification' (*taṣaḥḥur*). In these Sousse meetings the groups would read books and focus not on national level politics but on subjects like the history of Islam, studies of the Qurʾan, the life of the Prophet, how to pray, the importance of fasting, and moral questions like avoiding drugs, smoking, and drinking. They were also aware of the growing Salafist phenomenon, which was strong in Sousse, and talked about differentiating themselves from Salafists.[46] Some Salafists Nouri met were political quietists, but others advocated violence and, fuelled by ideas from writings like Ayman al-Zawahiri's tirade against democracy, *The Bitter Harvest* (*al-Hisad al-Murr*), they went to fight in Iraq in the mid-2000s. In contrast, Nouri's group read

[45] Jourchi was one of the Progressive Islamists who had left the Islamic Group in the late 1970s. He went on to work as a journalist and author and was also involved in Tunis with the Collectif 18 octobre in 2005 (see: Jourchi 2013).

[46] Although Sousse was seen as a secular tourist city and a stronghold of the ruling party, it was also a source of Salafism from the early 2000s. One of the two Tunisian assassins of the Afghan opposition warlord Ahmad Shah Massoud was Bouraoui El-Ouaer, a textile worker from Sousse who had been living in Belgium (Stroobants 2005). Many of the hundreds of young men arrested in the crackdown following the 2003 anti-terrorism law were from Sousse and some of those involved in the Suleiman incident of December 2006-January 2007 were also from the city, particularly from the poorer, more industrial southern quarter of Taffala, near the *louage* station. The Suleiman incident, in which security forces found around thirty armed men near Tunis planning an uprising against the regime, was 'a shambolic affair' but nonetheless revealed fierce anger against a regime seen as un-Islamic (Pargeter 2012, 85-92). Ten of the main group of twenty-nine convicted over the incident were from Sousse (Geisser and Gobe 2008, 5-6).

scholars sympathetic to non-violent political Islam including Fahmi Huwaidi, the Egyptian newspaper columnist; Tariq al-Bishri, the Egyptian judge; Mohammad Salim al-Awa, the Egyptian scholar; Burhan Ghalioun, a Syrian opposition figure; and Yusuf al-Qaradawi, including his *Islamic Awakening: Between Rejection and Extremism*, which Nouri understood as a criticism of blind obedience and intolerance. Nouri described this intellectual process as installing 'intellectual immunity' (*al-taḥṣīn al-fikrī*), immunising their minds against the rigidity of Salafism. He saw this dispute over different Islamist visions as having replaced the intellectual contest of the 1970s and 1980s, which was predominantly between the Islamists and the left. The key problem was that Salafists opposed political participation.

> In the university in the 2000s there was no longer a challenge like before from the leftists, no, the challenge was *inside* the religious school, the issue was the idea of *kufr* (unbelief). They believed entering parliament with democracy was *kufr*, and that the basis of change was armed struggle, that the basis of change was to build an Islamic emirate, and then *takfīr* (an accusation of apostasy) for all those who took part in democracy. (Nouri)

This intellectual immunity meant finding a response to Salafism from within Islam, and refusing to accept their characterisation that al-Nahda merely represented an 'Islam light' trend. It also meant accepting ideas from other political movements, for example adopting the notion of Tunisians as 'citizens' (*muwāṭinūn*) not 'subjects' (*raʿāyā*), an idea Nouri said he learned from Ettakatol, a centre-left opposition party.[47]

> There is a difference between patriotism, meaning we die and we are loyal to the homeland, and citizenship. OK, I give myself to the homeland but the homeland must give me something, let me feel like a citizen, and among even the simplest rights are the issues of participating in the drafting of public policy, participating in building a future Tunisia. (Nouri)

[47] Ettakatol, or The Democratic Forum for Labour and Liberties (al-Takkatul al-Dimuqrati min ajl al-ʿAmal wa-l-Hurriyyat), was a small social democratic opposition party set up in 1994 but given legal authorisation only in 2002. It was established and led by Mustapha Ben Jaafar, a doctor from Tunis.

The notion of political participation was one of many points of difference with the Salafists.

The question of this physical proximity and intellectual rivalry with the Salafists in the 2000s recurs with remarkable frequency. Another al-Nahda activist, Nabil, who was the son of a Zaytuna-educated imam and who became the head of one of the movement's sixteen local bureaux in Sousse, at one stage considered leading a group of Salafists in the city. Though he had not been a member of al-Nahda before the crackdown of the 1990s, he became involved with a group of likeminded activists who tried to restart al-Nahda in Sousse as a political force in the mid-2000s. However, the more senior leaders, who were only just emerging from prison at the time, told them to rein in their ambitions. At that stage some in his small group joined the Salafist movement in the city, some of whom began to travel to Iraq to fight with the anti-American insurgency. 'There were networks of connections at first between our ideas and theirs. But they considered themselves as waiting for jihad and us as cowards, and so there was an intellectual conflict' (Nabil). However, he remained close to them and watched them return from fighting in Iraq where they had felt betrayed because they were given poor quality weapons and were generally undervalued. Once returned to Sousse, he said, they began preparing to leave for the next jihad abroad. Nabil was asked to join and lead the Sousse group, but eventually refused.

> They were very angry and they weren't convinced of my point of view. There was a difference of ideas and the influence from outside Tunisia was stronger than from inside. They felt that al-Nahda couldn't change or resist Ben Ali, but that they, with their new ideas, could do a lot.

Soon after came the crackdown that followed the 2006-7 Suleiman incident: many in Sousse were arrested including Nabil, who was eventually jailed for six months for attending an unauthorised meeting.

In Sousse's universities there was also an effort among a small number of students to test the limits of activism. However, there was much less evidence of this here than in

other cities, like Tunis and Sfax, where groups of students calling themselves the Independents (al-Mustaqillun), but who were openly Islamist supporters, managed to be politically active on campus (Tiss). In the Faculty of Law in Sousse there was a small group of students in the mid 2000s, who later became members of al-Nahda, but who were at the time active within the main student union, UGET, and who were reading in private what texts they could download from the internet by Hassan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb. Some in this small student group were also among those meeting under Nouri's guidance in Sousse. Instead of identifying themselves as Islamists at the university, they rallied behind issues like opposing the ban on the veil in the university and defending Arab-Islamic identity. They challenged the regime's cultural values and its attempt to impose a French-style and Francophone education system in the university. In the later 2000s the student group would meet privately and would focus again on moral issues: prayer, fasting, resisting alcohol, drugs and smoking. This emphasis on Arab-Islamic identity returned after the revolution.

In the final months before the 2011 uprising these young people grew more confident. Several described a summer training camp in mid-2010, when they rented a house for a week in Chott Meriem, a tourist beachfront area in northern Sousse. There a group of fifteen to twenty likeminded young Islamists from Sousse, Sfax and Monastir spent the week studying and playing. They swam in the sea, cooked couscous together, and then studied books, read the Qurʾan, and stayed up late at night locked in discussion. One night Abdelhamid Jelassi, the senior al-Nahda leader and former prisoner, came to give a talk about the movement, its history, and their training for the future.

Thus a new generation came to the movement in the years before the uprising and focused their debates on questions of identity, ethics, and behavioural comportment. For them the ideological challenge with the left, as fought by the older generation, had been

replaced by a more urgent intellectual challenge from the Salafists. The emphasis was on correctly interpreting the holy texts, understanding the appropriate source of religious authority, and thinking about moral or behavioural issues. Ideas of political activism for this generation, at least in Sousse, were still very limited.

5.4 Activism outside al-Nahda

The 2000s saw the start of a return to political activism across Tunisia. The weight of repression lessened, in part because of pressure from international human rights groups but also because the regime now focused more attention on the security threat from nascent Salafist groups than on the apparently exhausted political opposition. Gradually, it became more possible for dissidents of all stripes to be socially or politically active. They found their voices in a revival of associations, especially human rights groups which resisted regime co-option and began to challenge the political calm (Chouikha and Gobe 2009). However, the reawakening of the self-described 'democratic left' brought awkward questions. They rallied around the call for the release of the several thousand political prisoners still in jail (most of whom were Nahdawis), for few among the rights activists would not oppose the brutal torture, long jail terms, and arbitrary judicial system. Yet, when considering the next step once Nahdawis were released, many leftists were reluctant to cooperate and saw al-Nahda still as an illiberal threat (Khiari 2002). It would take much work to dissolve this mistrust.

For al-Nahda in Sousse the most public activism was found not with the leaders but on the periphery of the movement, those who had been members but not in the leadership hierarchy and who had avoided long prison sentences. They were also on the intellectual periphery and tended to have strong personal friendships extending across political boundaries. These individuals tended to be less interested in al-Nahda's own political advancement and instead favoured broader goals like democratic reforms and human rights

causes while all the time retaining a deep personal religious commitment. They were so much on the periphery of the movement that after 2011 many in this group chose not to re-join the newly legalised al-Nahda.

In Sousse in the early 2000s there was only a small number of formal settings for oppositional civil society activities. The local branch of Amnesty International brought together academics, lawyers and human rights activists, including Moncef Marzouki, a doctor who in 2001 founded the opposition party Congress for the Republic (al-Muʾtamar min ajl al-Jumhuriyya, CPR), before going into exile in France the following year. At least two al-Nahda members joined the Amnesty branch, including Yahya, one of the first preachers from the 1970s who had become a civil society activist. The group would meet at an office on the second floor of a block on Rue Anatole France, in the city centre, to organise petitions and letter-writing campaigns. They worked on rights abuses abroad but rarely on Tunisian issues, for such were the limits on their activities set by the regime. Nevertheless, it offered a new chance for Sousse's few dozen activists to meet. For the Islamists involved it was particularly poignant given their experiences of repression. One of the Nahdawis involved was a lawyer, Zied, who had been arrested in May 1991, aged seventeen. After a year in prison he was unable to return to his state school, and was forced to finish his studies in a lower-quality private school, and then completed a law degree at the Faculty of Law in Sousse, despite being under administrative control. After 2000 Zied joined the Tunisian Association of Young Lawyers, even though it was dominated by supporters of the ruling party, and then began working with the Amnesty branch in Sousse. Despite limits preventing their work on Tunisian issues, he described one lecture when a lawyer from Gafsa came to talk about the history and development of the death penalty in Tunisia. Always there were policemen outside and sometimes inside the office, monitoring their work. For Zied, his Amnesty membership became a proud 'personal challenge', an

effort, however modest, to stand up to the abuses of the regime (Zied). 'What encouraged me was that you found respectable people from other trends in human rights work. In Amnesty it wasn't just normal people, but real people who struggled.' He also became increasingly self-confident with the policemen waiting outside the office. 'I became indifferent towards them. I wasn't committing a crime, I was defending rights and freedoms.'

By the mid-2000s there was increasing pressure in Sousse on the local branches of Amnesty and the LTDH as the regime clamped down on their new activism. Some Nahdawis began to work with an unauthorised human rights group, the International Association for the Support of Political Prisoners (al-Jamʿiyya al-Dawliyya li-Musanadat al-Masajin al-Siyasin, AISPP) founded in 2001. They gave material and psychological support to former prisoners and their families, trying to find employment for those without work and medical care for the sick. They often turned discreetly to the private clinics of doctors who had been with the movement in the 1970s and 1980s but who had avoided jail and repression. For others, the focus shifted to the Sousse branch of the Progressive Democratic Party (al-Hizb al-Dimuqrati al-Taqaddumi, PDP), which was set up in 2004 on Rue Soeur Joséphine, in the central Trocadero district.[48] In 2001 the PDP's central office had openly welcomed former al-Nahda members into its ranks, offering a form of political cover.[49] In Sousse, a number of al-Nahda civil society activists including Yahya migrated into the PDP, which became the 'only refuge' in the city, as he put it. From early 2003 the PDP began a remarkable rapprochement among all the major opposition parties. Led

[48] The party, established in 1981 as the RSP, was authorised in 1988. In 2001 it underwent an ideological revision, broadening its base and moving to a centre-left position as the newly-renamed PDP. In April 2012 it renamed itself the Republican Party (al-Hizb al-Jumhuri).

[49] At the relaunching of the party in 2001 a number of Islamist sympathisers joined the PDP at the national level, most notable among them Mohamed Goumani, a former Progressive Islamist, who became the PDP's deputy secretary general.

initially by exiles abroad, it began with a joint statement, the 'Appel de Tunis', calling for the release of all political prisoners and a new constitution for a political system based on popular sovereignty, the peaceful rotation of power, and the freedom of belief (Ayadi et al. 2003).[50] Building on this foundation, the leaders of the PDP in Tunis formed a political alliance in October 2005 with other opposition parties ranging from the communist PCOT to al-Nahda. Though the regime dismissed the Collectif 18 octobre as 'an unnatural alliance' (Kéfi 2006b), it grew in ambition, beginning with a high-profile group hunger strike and eventually producing a shared vision of a democratic Tunisia, with written papers on women's rights, the lifting of the ban on the veil, freedom of conscience, and on the relationship between religion and a future civil, democratic state (Collectif 18 octobre 2007). Nationally, it marked a moment of opposition compromise and unity, as well as the first overt return by al-Nahda to some form of political activism.

In Sousse five men gathered in the PDP offices to support the Collectif 18 octobre project with a brief but notable three-day hunger strike, an event that launched several years of cross-party discussions in the city. Al-Nahda's regional leaders, many of whom had by this stage left jail, were conspicuous by their absence. However, one of the five hunger strikers was Tahar, a gently spoken lawyer who had been twice forcibly conscripted into the army in the late 1980s as punishment for his Islamist activities at university in Sousse. Once freed from the army, he opened a shoe shop and raised enough money to complete his law degree at a private university and then from the late 1990s began attending Amnesty, LTDH, and PDP meetings in Sousse.

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[50] The statement was circulated through the prolific opposition website Tunezine.com, which was established in July 2001 by Zouhair Yahyaoui (1967-2005) a young economist and political dissident. Yahyaoui was arrested in 2002 and jailed for 18 months. He died of a heart attack in March 2005 and the site closed after his death, though its archives remain open.

The impetus began with one of the PDP members, Moncef, a civil society activist and former Progressive Islamist, who had been present at the Tunis hunger strike. He pushed for the Sousse branch to hold its own strike in solidarity. Historic tensions between the left and the Islamists threatened to overwhelm it from the start. Moncef said:

> I insisted but the others said they were afraid or there was a political calculation. Here on the left we didn't have enough leftists and there was a fear of the Islamists. The PCOT was afraid that the Islamists would surround and swallow up this strike. (Moncef)

The night before the strike, Moncef met with the local head of the PDP at his home, prepared a mattress and at 1am drove into the party's office in the city centre and slept there until morning. At 8am they formally declared the hunger strike was on. Dozens of police soon gathered on the street outside but by the end of the day four others had joined him: the former Nahdawi Tahar; a member of the local PCOT branch, Nasser Ben Romdhane; another PDP member; and an independent activist. 'It was an extraordinary day,' Moncef said. A photograph of the strikers dated 30 October 2005 shows the five crouched against a plain wall, each making the sign of a victory salute. Above them a banner read: 'The Movement of 18 October. Hunger but not submission' (*Harakat 18 Uktubir. al-juwʿ wa lā al-khuḍūʿ*).[51] Personal relations seem to have been important in securing this rare cross-party unity. Moncef was distrustful of al-Nahda, who he felt still nurtured the goal of an Islamic state, but he said of his Islamist friend and fellow hunger striker Tahar:

> I didn't see the other Islamists in Sousse from 1991 until about the last five days before 14 January [2011]. But he is a real activist, a democrat and I trusted him . . . I'd known him for a long time because we were in the same political family. He is very gentle and brave and I respect him. Especially, it was the fact that he was the only face of the Islamic family in regional political life. We were obliged to work with them. (Moncef)

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[51] The five hunger strikers were named in an edition of the PDP newspaper *al-Maoukif* which listed similar strikes across in the country in Sfax, Kairouan, Gafsa, Jendouba, Bizerte, Beja, Nabeul, Siliana, Mahdia, Medenine and Kasserine ("Idrabat Musanida" 2005).

Ben Romdhane, the PCOT representative, was also distrustful of the Islamists. The communists felt they had continued the struggle against the regime throughout the 1990s and early 2000s while the Islamists equivocated and still held to the possibility of striking a compromise deal with Ben Ali. In his view, though they might be prepared for a temporary alliance they could not imagine a shared political programme with the Islamists (Ben Romdhane).

For his part, Tahar, the al-Nahda hunger striker, also faced pressure from among his fellow Islamists before taking part in this joint venture. 'My Islamist friends said: "What do you expect from these people? Don't take part!" I said: "No, we must be present"' (Tahar). Until the hunger strike, Tahar had been attending Amnesty and PDP meetings but not speaking up. '2005 was the first time I spoke,' he said. 'The government said the Tunis strikes represented no one so we did our own strike here.' Except this was an individual challenge: there was only one Nahdawi in Sousse involved in this ground breaking opposition alliance. The movement's regional leaders did not take part in the action or the discussions that followed, even Hamadi Jebali who released from prison in 2006. In fact, there remained a lasting groundswell of mutual suspicion between the broader left, including the PDP, and al-Nahda, that returned after 2011.

The Sousse hunger strike was brief, but from this one action emerged a committee of around fifteen people, made up of the five strikers plus representatives from other opposition parties and human rights groups like the LTDH. They met in the local PDP office over the following years and debated the draft texts that were sent from Tunis, which discussed the shared political vision the major parties were trying to compose. Eventually, the collaboration dissolved ahead of the 2009 presidential election in a broader disagreement about whether the coalition would put forward a single candidate for the vote. Ironically, after the 2011 uprising al-Nahda leaders in Sousse held out the Collectif

18 octobre agreements as a sign of their consensual ambitions. At the time, however, shared action with human rights activists and other opposition parties was limited to a handful on the periphery of the movement. They had a broader interpretation of the Islamist project and were more open to engaging with their leftist rivals on cross-party human rights issues. It is striking how many of these Sousse activists, including Yahya, Zied, Tahar and others, chose not to re-join al-Nahda once it was formally legalised in 2011. Nor were they the only element of the movement searching for new opportunities for mobilisation during these straitened times.

5.5 A new political strategy

There were then a series of activities on the periphery of the movement, which until the mid-2000s took place largely beyond the oversight of the senior leaders, most of whom were still in jail or heavily restricted by administrative control. Formal political activities within al-Nahda were thought to have been confined to the movement-in-exile, which continued to hold occasional congresses in Europe, and to meet with other Tunisian opposition activists. Ghannouchi himself lived in London for most of the 1990s and 2000s, giving speeches and leading the movement-in-exile. However, there was also a revival of formal political activities within Tunisia as senior leaders began to come home from jail, but this work has often been overlooked. For the activists of Sousse, it quickly became apparent how hard this would be. One Nahdawi, Rachid, the maths teacher who had struggled to find a wife after leaving jail in late 2002, hoped to revive his political activities as quickly as possible. He refused to accept the administrative control order under which he had to sign in his home village some twenty miles from the city rather than in Sousse itself, even though senior Nahdawis warned him to be less confrontational. Then in 2004, ahead of the legislative elections of 24 October, he attended a meeting of the

leftist party Ettajdid in Hai Riadh.[52] He spoke briefly to the gathering of a few dozen activists to warn them against participating in what was clearly about to be another rigged election.

> I said: 'We, the Islamists, we tried it with Ben Ali and we lost everything so what will you do with these elections? You're giving legitimacy to these elections!' They tried to convince me that it was better to do something, even a minimum. (Rachid)

The next day Rachid was summoned to the Hai Riadh police station, and was told a report had been written about his attendance and that he had no right to attend further political meetings, and that his signing for administrative control was to be increased from once a week to daily signings. 'I was terrified,' he admitted. That was the end of his political activism until 2011.

Some movement leaders adopted a conciliatory attitude once they were out of jail: their goal was a negotiated survival not a return to the costly resistance against the regime that had shaped their approach before the crackdown. Perhaps the most important moment was the return in February 2006 of Jebali, who had spent sixteen years in jail, of which ten were in solitary confinement.[53] Jebali was the most senior Nahdawi from Sousse and from 2006 led the al-Nahda movement within Tunisia. His return brought a new sense of momentum:

> When I left, even before me, we regained confidence. We knew Ben Ali could no longer attack us. There was a group inside the country that started to organise itself. Not only the social aspect of the family, but the organisational and political aspect also started. (Jebali)

Jebali received visitors, Tunisian political figures as well as foreign diplomats, at his home in Sousse, near the al-Ghazali mosque in Hai al-Zahra. A US diplomat reported to

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[52] Ettajdid was previously the Tunisian Communist Party, which was authorised in 1981. The party dropped its attachment to Marxist-Leninism in 1992 and became the Movement of Renewal (Harkat al-Tajdid, known as Ettajdid).

[53] Jebali was one of 1,298 prisoners freed that day, including 70 from al-Nahda. The release came shortly after a highly-critical report about prison conditions was submitted by the International Committee of the Red Cross to the Tunisian interior ministry (Barrouhi 2006).

Washington after a two-hour meeting with Jebali in August 2006, that nine al-Nahda leaders had written to the Ben Ali regime a month earlier saying the group was 'ready to turn the page' and wanted to restart 'political life' (Ballard 2006). They received no response. Jebali told a journalist that 'reconciliation' with the regime was now an 'urgent necessity' to allow Tunisia to face the challenges of globalisation. 'Unfortunately some insist on treating us as "terrorists", whereas we should all look to the future together,' he said (Barrouhi 2006). Later in the year Jebali repeated his request for 'reconciliation' when he was asked in an interview with the opposition newspaper *al-Maoukif* what he thought of other Nahdawis who were pushing for a strong, united opposition under the more confrontational Collectif 18 octobre banner (al-Hamrouni 2006). Jebali was forced to deny any disagreement with the Collectif, but emphasised again that Tunisia now needed 'comprehensive national reconciliation' (*al-muṣālaḥa al-waṭaniyya al-shāmila*).

For some years there had been rumours of behind-the-scenes discussions between al-Nahda representatives abroad and emissaries from the Ben Ali regime.[54] These may have been no more than '*pseudo-négociations*', as Geisser described them (2007a). Nonetheless, it seemed the Islamists were much more open than some others in the opposition to a Moroccan-style accommodation with the authoritarian regime as a 'strategy of political survival' (Geisser and Gobe 2007a) and in an effort to allow exiled Nahdawis to return to Tunisia.[55] This stood in contrast to those like Marzouki's CPR who called for Ben Ali to go. In 2002 Ghannouchi argued in favour of a transition towards a 'symbolic presidency' with limited powers (Camau and Geisser 2003, 313). Then at al-Nahda's

[54] The Tunisian ambassador to Switzerland, Afif Hendaoui, reportedly met with a group of al-Nahda leaders in exile, including Ameur Laarayedh, in Berne in 2004. Shortly afterwards a number of senior al-Nahda figures were released from jail in Tunisia, including Laarayedh's brother, Ali (Kéfi 2006a).
[55] A few exiled Nahdawis were eventually allowed home, including Abdelmajid Najar, a theologian and senior movement leader born in 1945 in Medenine. He went into exile in 1989 in Europe and returned to Tunis in May 2010, when he too called for 'political reconciliation' (Arieff 2011, 5).

eighth congress, held in London in June 2007, the movement suggested it serve as a 'constructive opposition' and Ghannouchi said he was open to dialogue with the regime, making explicit the contrast between the 'moderate' al-Nahda and the violence of the Salafists behind the Suleiman incident (Geisser and Gobe 2008, 8-9).

However, even among those Nahdawis in Sousse there were already signs of differences emerging over strategy. Ajmi Lourimi, who had joined the movement as a teenager in the late 1970s, came out of jail in July 2007 after seventeen years (including ten in solitary confinement) and soon wrote an article in *Mouatinoun*, an opposition newspaper, arguing that al-Nahda needed a dramatic structural and ideological overhaul to adapt to the new realities (Lourimi 2007).[56] Parties were too preoccupied trying simply to exist rather than trying to develop; as he put it, they were caught up fighting the 'battle of presence' (*maʿrakat al-wujūd*) rather than the 'battle of renewal' (*maʿrakat al-tajdīd*). Of al-Nahda, he said:

> It is not possible for the movement to return to what it was in the 1990s . . . We are living in a new international situation but that new international situation meant many transformations and these transformations naturally produced an intellectual, ideological and political realignment and it's not possible for the Islamic movement and al-Nahda in particular to be isolated from that realignment and those transformations . . . It is inconceivable for the movement to be along the lines of what it was in the 1990s or the 1970s. (Lourimi 2007)

Lourimi was arguing for greater openness and a new vision for the movement that shifted from a narrow Islamist vision to a broader reformist, democratic, human rights-based agenda. He explicitly aligned himself with the Collectif 18 octobre, which he described as 'simply the most important political step in the country in recent years.' Others, however, flinched at such public calls for radical rethinking. In an open letter dated three days after

[56] *Mouatinoun* was the newspaper of the centre-left opposition party Ettakatol. The interview with Lourimi, appeared in a special edition celebrating the achievements of the Collectif 18 octobre. Lourimi was born in Chott Meriem and though he was involved in the movement in Sousse as a schoolboy in the 1970s he went to university in Tunis, where he studied philosophy, and soon became involved in the central organisation.

Lourimi's interview appeared, Abdelhamid Jelassi, the senior ex-prisoner living in Sousse, wrote that it was important to maintain movement unity. The movement's history of private, internal discussions in the early 1980s offered a model for similar discussions now, he said. However, he added a cautionary warning that seemed to prioritise organisational integrity over intellectual debate, the battle of presence over the battle of renewal:

> Our movement is now more visible and public. Many important questions come up for public debate in which everyone contributes, and it is for the general good of the country and the people that the goal is to investigate the truth. But though people are eager to clarify ideas and to argue positions we should not forget to take care to defer to the right of the brotherhood and to preserve friendly, harmonious relations because we have no greater reserves than that . . . As for what shortcomings may be found in what is actually present in our performance, individually or collectively, we should draw from it whatever are the necessary lessons and results, and this should not imprison us in a circle of self-flagellation (*jald al-dhāt*). For if we fell short yesterday, so we will stand determined not to fall short today, and if our return didn't exceed twenty percent of what was available yesterday, for example, then tomorrow it will be eighty or ninety percent. (Jelassi 2007)

Where Lourimi spoke of bold rethinking and political realignment, Jelassi spoke of the history of the movement, public discretion, and most of all 'the miracle of preserving al-Nahda's presence and unity'. It was Jelassi's position that won out: the battle of presence became the priority.

In the coming years, even Lourimi began to sense that the gulf between the movement and the Ben Ali regime was narrowing. In a long assessment of the movement published in 2009, he argued that al-Nahda, after years of confrontation, now saw the need for 'stability and reconciliation' and favoured reconciling with the regime (Lourimi 2009). This was a movement in 'new clothes' undergoing a 'natural evolution' (*al-taṭawwur al-ṭabīʿī*). In another essay written a few months later, he described al-Nahda's stages of development, from a movement of Islamisation (*aslama*) through *daʿwa* and education of the individual in the 1970s, to a political project in the 1980s that quickly overwhelmed the

other aspects of the movement, became confrontational and strove to take power but failed. Now al-Nahda had reached the next stage:

> The goal of the movement became not taking power but participation, and so began the slogan of joint work with the opposition and serious, comprehensive national reconciliation instead of the slogan of complete Islamisation (*al-aslama al-kāmila*) and of taking power (*iftikāk al-sulṭa*), and it moved to the call for mutual recognition (*al-iʿtirāf al-mutabādal*) and to considering the project as the task of society as a whole not the task of an individual party, and it became clear it was impossible to return to the first stage of Islamisation and that it was impossible to continue the second stage of taking power. (Lourimi 2010)

Here was evidence of the newly-emerging discourse of cooperation, inclusion, participation, and pragmatism, that saw the challenge ahead not as al-Nahda's project alone, but as a society-wide endeavour.

During the late 2000s a small group of around a dozen individuals from the movement in Sousse began holding discreet meetings in each other's homes to discuss reviving the movement. The priority was an evaluation (*taqyīm*) of al-Nahda's past actions, particularly during the late 1980s and early 1990s. It began as a series of informal discussions and then by 2009 a written document began to circulate to a limited audience of loyal Nahdawis in Sousse, and elsewhere in the country. The document, which remains secret, was a history of the movement's actions since its founding as the MTI in 1981 and included the same assessment made in the early 1990s both in prison and simultaneously in exile abroad: that al-Nahda had overreached in its confrontation with Ben Ali. Those most involved in the process of evaluation in Sousse tended not to be the more religiously-inclined preachers, who had dominated at the start of the movement in the 1970s, but those with more political leanings, who were often involved in student activities in the late 1980s and who went on to play important roles in the movement's regional leadership structure after the 2011 uprising.

One such meeting gathered around a dozen men and women from Akouda, a semi-rural district in northern Sousse, for a discussion led by Jelassi. They met in autumn 2010

at the home of the sister of one Nahdawi, on a sandy, undeveloped road near the sea in Chott Meriem. Each had received discreetly in advance a compact disc, which contained a document, which was a history and evaluation of the movement from the 1980s and the changing international environment since then. The purpose was, first, the logical reasoning that in order to progress, the movement should study its past—similar evaluations had been conducted in the mid-1980s and were to be tackled again in 2015-16. It was evident to nearly everyone that serious mistakes had been made in the early 1990s. Second, there was a more mundane effort to rouse the near-defeated individual activists and to tell them they were not forgotten. One activist present described how Jelassi tried to encourage the group that the movement would one day return:

> We had sacrificed and struggled for an idea and a project and it would be a shame if all these things were in vain, he [Jelassi] said. We have a message and we must return to this goal and revive it . . . 'We must try at least', he said. 'We should not surrender' . . . We said: 'How are we going to serve the world? Let's not be negative and let's try to revive the organisation' . . . It made us regain hope that we could progress, and that this tyrannical police state couldn't eradicate the movement, that it was a Godly movement (*ḥaraka rabbāniyya*) and its project was not materialistic, not about individuals, but about an idea, a civilisational project, that we want the best for the Muslim community, to revive the glory of Islam, to revive the values that came through the rightly-guided caliphs. (Sahbi)

However, this particular activist was personally much more pessimistic about al-Nahda's chances of revival.

> No one could see how to change the situation. Ben Ali was preparing himself for re-election in 2014 and practically all the society was with him . . . Public opinion didn't care much about al-Nahda and human rights. There was indifference and Ben Ali exploited that. It was all about preparing for the 2014 elections. (Sahbi)

In the end the task of evaluation was interrupted and left incomplete by the uprising, which began within weeks of this meeting. Very quickly, as we will see, al-Nahda presented itself as a party of revolution and the policy of reconciliation with the Ben Ali regime was quietly forgotten. Nevertheless, there had been a concerted effort in the late 2000s to revive al-Nahda as a political movement and to begin to acknowledge the missteps of the past. This serves to explain why the movement was so quick to profit from

the political vacuum created by the fall of the Ben Ali regime. Yet, it also suggests that deep-seated tensions about the broader strategy and vision of a contemporary Islamist movement remained unresolved.

Conclusion

The post-prison experience was one of punishment, restriction, and thwarted ambition for the Nahdawis of Sousse but it did not always mean their 'social death'. Instead, these accounts reveal individual stories of resilience against an architecture of repression that was designed to ostracise these men and women for the crime of their Islamist project. Religious commitment was re-channelled into a more personal and moral sense of a project. Individual determination now stood in place of the community of activists. Those on the structural and intellectual periphery felt more at ease collaborating with their leftist rivals, crossing the ideological bridge in the spirit of shared democratic enterprise. The younger generation, in turn, met in secret to discuss the intellectual challenge of the new religiosity of the satellite channel generation. Meanwhile, the small core leadership struggled to regroup and consider the once unthinkable compromise of reconciliation with a regime that had tried to eradicate them.

Here lay the groundwork that allowed the rapid return of the movement as a political force after the collapse of the Ben Ali regime. However, here too lay exposed the tensions at the heart of the movement that became yet more pronounced in the political freedom of the new Tunisia. The bold political project of the late 1980s had not merely been abandoned but criticised too as a dangerously ambitious overreach for which thousands had paid a heavy penalty. At the level of political leadership there was an entire, and not always unopposed, volte-face, in which the necessary cost of survival was reckoned to require reconciliation with the regime. The battle of presence had won out against the battle of renewal. Meanwhile, lower down the movement hierarchy, individuals

were reclaiming the Islamist project for themselves. For some it meant renouncing the ambitions of the party in favour of a broader, shared democratic agenda, for others it meant rediscovering the ethical and moral compulsions that had driven the movement in its initial stages in the 1970s. The tension between costly political ambition and personal, moral commitment was already emerging. After 2011 it would only deepen.

6 Rebuilding and Fragmenting

> Are we a political movement with an Islamic background? Are we fundamentally an Islamic movement that has a political dimension? Or are we a political movement with no religious dimension? It needs to be theorised, to be thought through in depth. I believe that we have a comprehensive project, with politics, economics, religion, art, everything in the Qurʾan. But how can we implement this for people? It needs much more reflection.
>
> *Rachid, imprisoned 1991-2002, member of al-Nahda's regional bureau in Sousse and the national Consultative Council*.

The uprising that brought down the Ben Ali regime was not of al-Nahda's making. The movement, like all other political parties and the regime itself, was caught unaware, even if some of its members took part as individuals in the many demonstrations that shook the country from 17 December 2010 onwards. Yet, once Ben Ali had fled on 14 January 2011, al-Nahda reacted rapidly to the new opportunities. Drawing on the recent efforts to rebuild networks among former prisoners within Tunisia, communities of Nahdawis across the country moved quickly to meet, organise, and structure themselves anew. Ghannouchi flew back from exile on 30 January for the first time since 1989. Within a week his office issued a new 'founding statement' (Harakat al-Nahda 2011) and for the first time al-Nahda received official authorisation as a legal party on 1 March. By then groups of Nahdawis in Sousse had already begun to re-establish the organisational structures for the return of their movement and to prepare for the new opportunities now open to them. In October 2011, al-Nahda emerged victorious from Tunisia's first free elections, winning in all but one of thirty-three constituencies and dominating in urban Tunis as much as it did in rural Tataouine.

The scholarly narrative of al-Nahda in the period from 2011 has focused on the leadership's strategic choices in the context of the democratic transition. These readings are framed by the process of democratisation and tend to underscore the political and

institutional constraints acting on al-Nahda and the acts of compromise and concession that followed (Stepan 2012; Guazzone 2013; Allani 2013; Hashemi 2013; Pickard 2015, 30; Netterstrøm 2015; Boubekeur 2015). Indeed, al-Nahda did opt for a series of pragmatic decisions: to press for a coalition government after winning the 2011 elections, to compromise its Islamising zeal when drafting the constitution, to resist efforts to exclude former regime figures from political life, to resign from government in January 2014 after popular protest, to concede defeat in the October 2014 legislative elections, and to resist the temptation to contest the presidential elections a month later.

However, another approach to understanding al-Nahda in this transitional period is to ask how these choices affected the internal dynamics within an organisation that had for many years enveloped a diverse community. Islamist movements have often been seen as divided between those who have ambitions to acquire state power and those who give primacy to their relationships to the community instead of the state (Volpi and Stein 2015). However, al-Nahda combined both a formal political party and a religious social movement in one organisation not just as a response to authoritarianism but even once the political process had opened up to pluralist competition, an ambiguity evident in the name under which it ran for election: the Party of the Movement of al-Nahda (Hizb Harakat al-Nahda). Such blurring of the lines reflected the trajectory of an organisation that had since the early 1980s both sought to compete within a democratic pluralist process and also to build a grassroots morality-focused subculture. These different elements fitted less comfortably together as the movement adapted its strategies and ideas to the new political opportunities. This became particularly evident at the local level in Sousse.

An internal debate quickly developed within al-Nahda about whether to continue both political and preaching projects simultaneously within a single organisation, or whether to spin off a separate political party along the lines of Islamist political structures,

elsewhere in the region, like the Freedom and Justice Party (Hizb al-Hurriyya wa-l-ʿAdala, FJP) in Egypt, the Party of Justice and Development (Hizb al-ʿAdala wa-l-Tanmiyya, PJD) in Morocco, or the Islamic Action Front in Jordan. As Tunisia's democratic transition gathered pace, so the division within the movement deepened between those who favoured competing in the formal state-level political process and those who preferred projects of Islamisation from below, whether through preaching, civil society groups, or charitable activities.

At first sight, this division appeared to echo Roy's failure of political Islam thesis, in which he predicts Islamist movements, having failed to capture the state, will split into normalised national political parties on the one hand, and a societal, shariʿa-seeking phenomenon of 'neofundamentalism' on the other (Roy 1994). Yet, al-Nahda does not fit neatly into this explanation. After all, its political project was always unusual among Islamist movements, downplaying ambitions to apply the shariʿa, and accepting popular sovereignty and a civil state as early as the 1980s. The divisions that became clear within al-Nahda in the years after 2011 were not new but rather represented the separation of long-running parallel trends dating back, as we have seen, three decades. Nor would it be right to see those Nahdawis who were disenchanted with formal politics as themselves acting in only apolitical ways. As I have argued, morality-focused mobilisation, whether through a session of preaching, or a civil society-organised discussion event, or a programme of charitable giving, is a form of political activism in that it challenges practices of power and control. As Ismail puts it: 'In the domain of social relations, the application of rules of conduct that are not state sanctioned confirms the Islamists' influence not merely as social actors but as political contestants' (2006b, 168).

We would do better to acknowledge that Islamist organisations are as heterogeneous as any other social movements and that their ideas and activism adapt to the

changing political context. It is not merely that they shape the new landscape but that they in turn are shaped by it (Roy 2013, 15). After all, there had been moments of intellectual and strategic adaptation throughout al-Nahda's history: in the late 1970s, when it first reached out beyond an original *daʿwa* project; in the 1980s, when it endorsed democracy, a civil state, and the Tunisian Personal Status Code hoping to enter the political process; after the confrontation of the early 1990s, when it reprioritised cultural and social work over the political; and in the 2000s, when it pushed for 'reconciliation' with the Ben Ali regime. Indeed, as Malika Zeghal points out, al-Nahda's movement over this period towards a commitment to democracy was not unique, but instead a feature common to most political opposition groups in Tunisia since the 1970s (2013, 259). The era after 2011 should be seen as another phase of adaptation. Now al-Nahda described itself not as Islamist but, in Ghannouchi's own words, as 'a civil party with an Islamic reference' (*ḥizb madanī dhū marjiʿiyya islāmiyya*) (al-Jamaoui 2012). Yet the precise meaning of this semantic shift was still contested and, at least initially, it amounted to little more than guarding the Islamic tradition. In that respect, the movement shared characteristics with other Islamist groups in the region which, as Tariq Ramadan argues, tended to be 'more concerned with giving "Islamic" legitimacy to their rhetoric than with providing concrete answers to contemporary problems' (2012, 98). Behind the ambiguity, this latest challenge of adapting to new democratic political competition within a globalised economic world order produced a deep structural and intellectual crisis within the movement.

This chapter demonstrates how al-Nahda rebuilt itself in Sousse in the months and years after the fall of the Ben Ali regime, and why it began to fragment. It considers in detail the movement's campaign for the October 2014 legislative elections, and the profound implications of election defeat on ordinary members. The chapter argues that in the eyes of many Nahdawis, the pragmatic steps their leaders took in order to be accepted

within the new political process undermined the movement's electoral legitimacy, diluted its ideological vision, and weakened its organisational structure. The case of al-Nahda demonstrates that ideological evolution and political pragmatism can have a significant organisational cost.

6.1 Rebuilding

Sousse was not at the forefront of the uprising that toppled Ben Ali and, for the most part, the city remained calm until the day Ben Ali fled. Indeed, several Nahdawis and other political activists talked of their disgust when on Sunday 9 January 2011 they saw thousands of their fellow Sousse residents out on the streets not challenging the regime but celebrating the victory of the local football team, Étoile Sportive du Sahel, over their long-time rivals Espérance Sportive de Tunis. Yet the uprising did touch Sousse, with protests by doctors in front of the Farhat Hached hospital, daily demonstrations among lawyers and human rights activists outside the UGTT headquarters downtown, and some violent confrontations between students and the police in the university district of Hai Riadh. Some Nahdawis attended these protests, others watched cautiously from a distance. Once Ben Ali had fled, however, they moved quickly to start meeting again.

It was the older members, men and women now in their late forties and early fifties who had been student activists in the 1980s and often prisoners in the 1990s, who orchestrated the project of rebuilding. This was perhaps inevitable, but it gave a particular hue to the new movement. This was no longer a defiant young generation newly empowered by their university experiences. Rather, it had become a conservative social middle class, which, as Fabio Merone argues, was ready to 'assimilate to the national project' in return for material benefits and a reference to their conservative Islamic values (2015, 82). At the same time, though, this generation brought an instinctive return to a style of organising familiar to the secretive and confrontational years of the 1980s. In early

February in Kalaa Kebira, around two dozen Nahdawis held an initial meeting in one of their homes. Among them was Mohamed Chemli, who had led the movement in Sousse in the late 1980s and who was again to be appointed leader of the regional bureau in 2011. The next meeting in Kalaa was larger and included Jaleleddine Rouis, the doctor from M'saken who had led the al-Nahda electoral list in 1989. Hedi, an ex-prisoner and former student activist from Kalaa, attended the meetings:

> It was like a dream, not reality . . . You invited people you knew, people that you remembered, and the brothers started rapidly gathering and everyone took up an activity, whether political or street work, and we started reviving things on the basis of the old mentality. Not on the mentality that you're now a party, but on the old way, as if you were spending from your previous knowledge: not through scientific organisation, but through co-ordination, meetings, mutual respect, and the solidarity between brothers.

A founding meeting was held and everyone attending proposed a candidate to lead the al-Nahda office in Kalaa. A vote was taken and Hedi was elected as the leader, or local general secretary (*al-kātib al-ʿāmm al-maḥallī*), of the bureau in Kalaa, with around a dozen others elected to positions in the bureau. Similar informal meetings and votes were held in all sixteen of the administrative districts across the governorate in February and March 2011, creating a much wider network of local offices than had ever been possible in the 1980s when the movement was unauthorised and operated much less formally. These local offices formed the first structural layer of the movement, and the main organising centre for all ordinary members. As Hamza, another middle-aged Kalaa Kebira activist, put it: 'The structure is the motor'. A larger meeting was then held in central Sousse to elect the movement's regional bureau. Every local office presented four candidates for election to the bureau, which Chemli was chosen to lead as regional general secretary (*al-kātib al-ʿāmm al-jihawī*). Around a dozen other Nahdawis, including two women, were chosen for various roles, including: structure and organisation; political work and relations with parties; administration and finance; women and family; youth; education and training;

culture; and media. This regional bureau then reported up to the movement's central structures: the administrative offices; the national Consultative Council, which was made up of 150 directly and indirectly elected members and which met every three months; and the 26-member Executive Bureau, which included Ghannouchi (whose title was simply 'president' (*raʾīs al-ḥaraka*)), and his vice-presidents, Jelassi and Mourou.[57]

Whereas in the early 1980s supporters of the movement graduated through various secretive ranks from sympathiser and member of an open family, to committed adherent and member of a closed family, now the movement operated as an open political party, with a formal application procedure for entry to the one level of membership on offer (in contrast not only to the MTI in the 1980s but also to the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt with its five ranks of membership (Kandil 2015, 6)). In an application form, candidates for membership had to give their name, date of birth, identity card number, level of education, profession, address, family status, and some indication of the role they hoped to play within the movement. Each had to be proposed by an existing member and to agree to abide by nine conditions, including to 'respect and defend the Arab-Islamic identity and the principles of human rights and the gains made in the country', to respect the decisions made by al-Nahda, to participate in the movement's activities, to follow the programme of cultivation (*tathqīf*), education (*tarbiya*) and training (*takwīn*), to pay a regular financial contribution, and to act correctly, with good behaviour and good morals (Nabil).[58]

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[57] This is in contrast, for example, to the leader of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood who is the 'general guide' (*al-murshid al-ʿāmm*). Mourou unsuccessfully contested the 2011 elections as head of his own small party and then re-joined al-Nahda in July 2012, when he was made vice-president.

[58] The notion of 'gains made in the country' (*makāsib al-bilād*) is purposefully vague but appears to refer to those laws and institutions that were then regarded as widely accepted and defended in Tunisian society, including those achieved during the 2011 uprising, such as ending authoritarian rule. Most secularist and leftist politicians would have considered, for example, the Personal Status Code as among those 'gains'. In the 1980s, al-Nahda gradually came round to accepting the Personal Status Code and by 2011 the movement said publicly it would not seek to change it.

Movement organisers emphasised the importance of participation in activities organised by the local office, which ranged in sophistication from football games to organised efforts at religious, political, and intellectual training through the revival of the small study group known as 'the family' (*al-usra*), which was literally intended to envelope the new member in a supportive network of familial bonds. These groups attempted to replicate the close-knit study cells that existed in the 1980s and which were directly comparable to similar study groups in other Islamist movements in the region, notably the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt for whom the goal of such 'cultivation' was not to win over more believers but to reform the individual in order 'to produce a new kind of person: the Muslim Brother' (Kandil 2015, 6). In the Tunisian case, the priority for the *usra* was to focus on young members entering the Nahdawi community for the first time. As Nabil, now the leader of one local office in Sousse, put it:

> The new generation doesn't have the original belonging to the al-Nahda movement, they don't have a familial belonging. They need to study the history of al-Nahda in order to know about it, because they are not joining a new party formed recently but an old organisation . . . The *usra* becomes a second family. They give training in religion, morals, in how to deal with people, in behaviour . . . And we develop our vision of society from a religious view.

The group of around ten members was to meet weekly and could be single sex or a mixture of men and women. They would gather at their local al-Nahda office or in one of their homes and would follow a predetermined programme of mostly Qurʾanic study drawing from a monthly booklet sent by the movement's central office in Tunis known as the 'educational notebooks' (*al-kurrāsāt al-tarbawiyya*). This would include passages from the Qurʾan that were to be memorised, as well as commentary on the Qurʾan and hadith, and stories from the life of the Prophet. The Qurʾanic commentary drew on Sayyid Qutb's *In the Shade of the Qurʾan*, which had been the most popular commentary read by Nahdawis (and other Islamists including within the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood) since the 1970s, while the hadith were drawn from the popular collection *The Forty Hadith* by the seventh-

century scholar Imam al-Nawawi (*al-Arbaʿin al-Nawawi*). There were also efforts to link the religious discussions to contemporary political challenges. One woman, Fatima, an Arabic teacher who joined the movement in 2011, described her regular *usra* meetings in a women's group at the al-Nahda regional office in central Sousse.

> The discussions are religious but even on religious subjects we connect them to political problems. We always try to find a link, for example, between the life of the Prophet, or verses of the Qurʾan, and what is happening in political life . . . We always try to show the Qurʾan is not isolated from life but is anchored in life. We always try to take conclusions, to extract laws and rules, and to make a link between the past and contemporary life. (Fatima)

The ambition here, driven by the activists from the 1980s, was to return to a project that encompassed both the religious and the political in one comprehensive understanding.

Initially, the movement seemed to attract a large number of young supporters who emerged from the period of 'desertification' (*taṣaḥḥur*) wanting to be active in an Islamist organisation. In the first months of 2011 there was a rush of young people eager to join the newly revived al-Nahda. On university campuses across Sousse those few students who had tried to organise discreetly on an Islamic platform before the uprising were now suddenly able to gather openly without fear. They formed themselves into a group they called the Islamic Youth in the University (al-Shabab al-Islami bi-l-Jamiʿa) and in April 2011 they held a small rally in the Faculty of Law in Hai Riadh, with posters and banners hung from the courtyard walls with such slogans as 'Arab-Islamic Identity', 'Civil State with an Islamic Reference', 'There is No Glory for Us Except Through Islam', and 'Down with Circular 108', referring to the ban on the hijab in government institutions dating back to 1981. At this stage the group was still under the strong influence of experienced al-Nahda activists and had close links with the movement: a few weeks later Rafik Abdessalem, a senior al-Nahda exile and son-in-law to Ghannouchi, was invited to the Faculty of Law to give a talk about democracy. However, soon the movement began to lose influence over the group as more young people joined bringing with them different

and often more Salafist-influenced ambitions. One of the group's organisers, Nouri, who had been involved in youth discussions in Sousse before 2011, admitted they soon lost control:

> The idea was to preserve this Islamic phenomenon but there were some difficulties. In some places we couldn't control some of the statements that were attributed to the Islamic Youth in the University because they weren't actually the ideas of the al-Nahda movement. The group had the title 'Islamic' and we soon saw it included Salafists, or members of Hizb al-Tahrir, people who believed that democracy was blasphemy (*kufr*).[59]

The challenge was not in trying to find young people sympathetic to an Islamic cause, but in defining precisely what that cause should be and how to distinguish a particular al-Nahda project from a range of positions extending from reformism to much more hard-line Salafist interpretations of Islam's role in society. In October 2011, for example, a group of Salafist-influenced students staged a major demonstration at the Faculty of Arts and Humanities in Sousse because a female student had been turned away for wearing a *niqāb*, the full-face veil. It was a protest that al-Nahda had not organised and that produced a major standoff with the university administration, as well as some minor violence. A similar but more prominent demonstration in favour of the *niqāb* followed in November at the Faculty of Arts and Humanities at La Manouba in Tunis (Mellakh 2013). Nouri and others within al-Nahda decided to rename the student group as al-Nahda Youth in the University in the hope of excluding those with more extreme views.

Tremendous energy and ambition went in to the rebuilding of the movement in the first months of 2011, a moment when it was still unclear what the transition to democracy might bring and when for many there was a real fear of a return of the authoritarian RCD regime. Many of the former activists of the 1980s returned to their work with a yearning to

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[59] Hizb ut-Tahrir, founded in Tunisia in the 1980s and given brief legal authorisation in 2012-2015, was the Tunisian branch of the international organisation of the same name which advocated for an Islamic caliphate by way of a coup and which opposed the democratic political process.

revive the al-Nahda they had once known: to rebuild the project of internal educational training and the sense of a tightly-bonded community it had previously forged. However, the problems encountered early on by the student organisers on university campuses were indicative of the substantial challenge that lay ahead.

6.2 Fragmenting

As hard as the movement worked to rebuild itself, to restart the *usra* training, and to recruit a new generation of Nahdawis, it soon became clear that its primary struggle would be to hold on to its structural integrity. This was not the first organisational crisis the movement had faced: there had been internal differences of opinion in the past at moments of great change, for example in the late 1970s when the Progressive Islamists split away from the increasingly politicised Islamic Group, or in the early 1990s when Mourou and others resigned from al-Nahda in protest at its confrontational strategy. However, the struggle after 2011 to reconcile competing viewpoints was the most serious internal conflict in the movement's history.

The biggest challenge lay with the new generation of supporters. As the student organisers had soon discovered, the rush of new young members brought its own complications. Al-Nahda activists in local offices across the city tried to organise educational and religious training for their new young members but soon faced conflicting opinions. Hedi, the leader of the Kalaa Kebira bureau, found many new members either hoped al-Nahda would be a direct replacement to the RCD-style clientalist party machine and that their membership would bring them personal advancement and influence in the community, or, alternatively, they hoped that al-Nahda was intent on Islamising the Tunisian state to a much greater degree than it admitted in public. It was disconcerting to find both ambitions meeting in one organisation, particularly those with more hardline religious beliefs.

> Some religious young people came on the basis that the movement was Islamic and so they should support it . . . But they were looking for an extremist religious movement and they didn't find it. There was a shock (*rajja*) and many of them began to accuse the movement of not being Islamist at all but secularist. (Hedi)

Hedi considered this a failure on the part of al-Nahda, which, under pressure to defend itself in the face of successive national political crises, had not pursued its internal educational programme for new recruits as carefully as it had intended.

> We should have given specific care to them because they were not brought up inside the movement. They felt they should be in the movement but they couldn't find how to do that, and the movement didn't give them enough time to adapt and make them understand they should go through stages until they found their real place. (Hedi)

Soon the exigencies of belonging to a movement that from October 2011 to January 2014 led the ruling coalition government began to overwhelm the process of internal educational training. It placed the movement in what James Jasper calls a Janus dilemma, in which it needed simultaneous strategies to communicate with two different audiences: outsiders and insiders (2006, 126). To movement outsiders, al-Nahda had to emphasise its democratic credentials, while to insiders it had to stress a continued connection with the Islamic reference. Efforts were made, but it proved a profoundly challenging balancing act. Not only did local offices run their programmes of education and 'cultivation', but also young people were given positions of responsibility within the regional bureau. From there they defended in public the al-Nahda project as unthreatening in the face of its secular critics, but also in more private settings to use a religious vocabulary in an effort to engage with the Salafist intellectual challenge, believing they could draw those with more extreme views into the Nahdawi political vision of reformist participative political Islam. Again, as in the years before the 2011 uprising, they drew on their reading of Qaradawi's *Islamic Awakening* and of Hassan al-Banna's writings to defend their project. They presented their goals, in the words of Nejib, one of the young activists in Sousse who was still a university

student in 2011, as closer to rationalism (*ʿaqlāniyya*) and reality (*wāqiʿiyya*) than the Salafist vision.

> The Salafists found themselves in the climate of freedom but they had no precedent of intellectual theorizing . . . The drastic point of distinction between us was that al-Nahda was a movement in communication with society, with an idea of participation, but the Salafist movement was focused on appearance and isolating yourself from society . . . They were developing and we needed to deal with them in one way or another, to absorb them, to oblige them to follow a certain path, to be guided, to be structured. (Nejib)

Young activists like Nejib, who had trained in Qurʾanic studies himself, drew on quotations from the text with particular commentaries that defended the al-Nahda vision in order to challenge and debate with what he called the 'intellectual stagnation' of the young Salafist-influenced men and women around him.

More formally, al-Nahda ran national workshops in order to explain to the new young membership the history of the movement and the nature of its project, and particularly to defend the growing number of concessions al-Nahda was making at the political level. The most far-reaching concession was to drop the demand that the shariʿa be a source of legislation in the new constitution. In February 2012, al-Nahda had first included in a draft constitution proposal an article stating that the shariʿa should be 'a fundamental source of legislation' (*maṣdar asāsī min maṣādir al-tashrīʿ*) (Harakat al-Nahda 2012c). However, after much public criticism, Ghannouchi dropped the idea in April 2012, saying it was too divisive because the concept was 'unclear' for most Tunisians (Ben Ahmad 2012). The al-Nahda workshops were designed to explain such decisions to the ordinary members of the movement, and particularly the newly arrived youth, many of whom eventually walked away in frustration. One of the students at the Faculty of Law who joined al-Nahda in 2011 and became an organiser within the movement in Sousse, spent six days at a training conference in Tataouine in 2012 with around 300 others. There were classes about the history of al-Nahda, and its intellectual

vision, as well as debates about the role of the shariʿa, interspersed with group prayer sessions and religious discussions. He, like many others, had believed that the shariʿa should indeed be one of the sources of law in Tunisia, but he now argued that al-Nahda should wait until there was less resistance to the movement from within the government administration.

> In any state when the executive authority takes a decision and has no structure to influence that project, it can't apply it. If we decided to apply the shariʿa we would be in confrontation with the whole apparatus of the state: judicial, executive, legislative. We'd find not one Islamist. We as al-Nahda we have our project, but we don't have the apparatus to apply it. (Khalid)

His objection was practical, not intellectual: at the present moment it was simply not possible to apply the shariʿa. Other young members absorbed different elements of the official discourse from the workshops they too attended. One female student, aged 24, from Hammam Sousse, who ran the youth section of her local al-Nahda office, had attended several workshops during which there were long debates over the movement's policies.

> I remember many young people demanded that this term 'shariʿa' should be in the constitution as a source of legislation. Some students had different ideas and argued that the shariʿa alone is not Islam, but that Islam is bigger and more important than the shariʿa. We say there are a minimum of principles that must be present in society first. (Samia)

Her argument was intellectual: only in a truly just society with neither poverty nor inequality could the shariʿa properly be applied. In one sense, such comments indicated the reach of the movement's long programme of internal dissemination of its new policy positions. Yet such loyal youth activists were small in number; both they and the older generation of Nahdawis frequently admitted the challenge they faced in attracting and retaining a large number of young supporters.

It was not only among young members that there was evidence of fragmentation. A number of activists who had played prominent roles within the movement since its earliest years chose not to re-join when al-Nahda was formally legalised in March 2011. In their

words, they remained believers in the Islamic project and supportive of al-Nahda but from a position outside the movement. This tended to affect those who had been most involved in working in alliance with other political movements or in civil society or human rights organisations and who seemed to have been deeply influenced by a human rights discourse and a more inclusive, cross-party societal project. For example, Tahar, the lawyer and former Nahdawi who had taken part in the Sousse hunger strike in 2005 as part of the Collectif 18 octobre, was one of those who chose not to re-join the movement. Instead he invested his energy in establishing a local cultural heritage organisation in his district that was open to Tunisians of all political backgrounds.

> I work more freely in an association than in the party. All the rules in the party limit your situation and you end up opposing or confronting other parties. That's political life but we're not used to it and we need to learn the way of accepting others. I respect al-Nahda and at heart I'm with them but I'm not a member. I prefer to be able to speak freely with others. (Tahar)

Others who took a similar path after 2011 included Yahya, who had been one of the earliest preachers in the movement in the 1970s and who, after four years in prison, went on to work in Amnesty International and in the PDP in the 2000s. He ran, unsuccessfully, on an independent list in Sousse in the October 2011 elections, and though he remained close to the Nahdawi community he did not re-join the movement. One of his close friends, another former Nahdawi who had been involved in religious training in the late 1970s in Sousse and who then also became involved in civil society work, had also decided not to return to the movement and was particularly aware of the incongruity between his new work and his former al-Nahda identity.

> My work now is in civil society and I want to be seen to be independent. I want to be able to criticise anyone in a fair way and I couldn't do that if I was a member of al-Nahda. Also, my work involves inspecting prison conditions and meeting prisoners, some of whom al-Nahda wouldn't approve of, like former members of

> the RCD or homosexuals or Femen activists.[60] I couldn't imagine al-Nahda accepting that. But I put human rights first and in that sense my ideas have evolved more than al-Nahda's. The Qur'an says that all sons of Adam are created equally: there is an Islamic idea of liberty. But most in al-Nahda don't understand this even though this is the real culture of Islam. Religion brings us to the real sense of being brothers with all, having equal respect for all, including non-Muslims. (Noumi)

He had absorbed new priorities of rights and liberties that he felt his fellow Nahdawis had not yet embraced. However, he was still careful to present his views in an Islamic framework. Such individuals moved across from a network of Islamists into a very different network of civil society activists, articulating their reasoning by drawing from a new global discourse of human rights. Their experience of cooperation in the 2000s with political and human rights activists beyond the al-Nahda community so deeply affected their sense of purpose that they repositioned themselves in these new networks, ones traditionally dominated by the secular left in Tunisia. Yet, they also maintained a familial relationship with al-Nahda as well as rearticulating the inspiration they drew from a reference to the Islamic tradition.

Al-Nahda suffered political defections. Most prominent among those who left the movement was Hamadi Jebali, the Sousse leader who was prime minister between October 2011 and February 2013. After his public proposal for a technocratic national unity government was rejected by the al-Nahda leadership, he gradually distanced himself from the movement before resigning in December 2014 apparently in frustration at its election strategy. Another who left was Riadh Chaibi, a former Consultative Council member who resigned in mid-2013, saying that al-Nahda was more interested in power struggles than in achieving the goals of the uprising (Blaise 2013). There were similar departures at the local level. Fattouma Attia, elected in 2011 as one of four al-Nahda deputies from Sousse,

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[60] Femen was a group of women activists, originating in the Ukraine, who staged topless demonstrations against patriarchal power structures. In May 2013 a young Tunisian women, Amina Sboui, also known as Amina Tyler, was arrested for a Femen protest ("Tunisie : ouverture du procès d'Amina" 2013).

resigned from the movement in early 2013 and later joined a more secular party, Afek Tounes; and Mounir Amara, head of al-Nahda's local bureau in Enfidha, in the north of the Sousse governorate, quit in August 2014 in a public dispute over the choice of local election candidates. Others rebelled from within the movement. Despite the workshops about postponing the imposition of the shariʿa, in January 2014 as many as twenty-one of al-Nahda's eighty-nine originally elected deputies in the Constituent Assembly voted in favour of a failed amendment that would have made the Qurʾan and the Sunna principal sources of legislation in the new constitution (al-Bawsala 2014c). The same day, seventeen al-Nahda deputies voted for an amendment that would have removed the state's protection of freedom of conscience (al-Bawsala 2014b). At the movement's ninth congress, al-Nahda had committed to ban senior figures from the RCD from political life (Harakat al-Nahda 2012a, 7). However, the leadership later changed its position and advocated for cross-party 'consensus'. Yet it only just managed to convince enough al-Nahda deputies in the assembly to reject (by a single vote) a draft article of the new Electoral Law that would have excluded former senior RCD figures from contesting elections. As many as thirty-nine al-Nahda deputies defied the leadership (al-Bawsala 2014a).[61]

Of course, the new opportunities and challenges presented by the uprising brought difficulties to most political parties; many suffered internal crises often even more damaging that those facing al-Nahda. Some of the old political forces almost entirely petered out. The PDP, previously the most significant opposition party in the Ben Ali

[61] In these votes the four al-Nahda deputies from Sousse generally followed a pattern. The two with the most senior positions in the movement either aligned themselves with or avoided rebelling against the leadership. Monia Ibrahim voted against adopting the Qurʾan as a source of legislation, abstained on removing the freedom of conscience protection, and voted against the exclusionary article of the Electoral Law. Zied Ladhari also voted against adopting the Qurʾan as a source of legislation, was absent on the freedom of conscience vote, and abstained on the Electoral Law article. However, Kamel Ben Romdhane, a noted hardliner, voted in favour of all three. Fattouma Attia, who was distancing herself from al-Nahda, was absent for the vote on the Qurʾan as a legislative source, opposed the vote removing freedom of conscience, and was absent for the Electoral Law vote (al-Bawsala 2014a, b, c).

years, won only 16 seats nationwide in the 2011 elections and just one in 2014, when it ran under a new name as the Republican Party (al-Hizb al-Jumhuri). The CPR and Ettakatol suffered many defections and a collapse in popular support. The CPR won 29 seats in 2011 but just four in 2014; Ettakatol won 20 seats in 2011 and none at all in 2014. New parties also struggled. Nidaa Tounes (Harakat Nidaʾ Tunis, Call of Tunisia), the anti-Islamist party established in 2012 to challenge al-Nahda and which won both the legislative and presidential elections in 2014, went on itself to suffer a deep structural split in 2015 triggered by an internal power struggle.

Beyond the political disagreements that had become typical of all major parties in the years after the 2011 uprising, al-Nahda struggled with its own particular internal fragmentation. This was not simply the result of disagreement over political strategy or the choice of individual candidates for office, but evidence of a more profound structural and intellectual debate within a movement trying to adapt itself to the new demands of post-2011 Tunisia. Nowhere was the more apparent than during the October 2014 legislative election campaign.

6.3 An election campaign

Al-Nahda's election campaign in Sousse in October 2014 revealed the movement's efforts to reposition its public face. It drew ambiguously from its Islamic heritage while also offering technocratic solutions to contemporary social and economic challenges. Such were the directions issued by the central leadership, which were adapted and reshaped by individual activists at the local level who increasingly felt constrained by the consensus-seeking caution of their leaders.

Al-Nahda had performed surprisingly well in the first elections on 23 October 2011, echoing its fateful result in April 1989. Nationwide the movement won 37 percent of the vote and 89 out of 217 Constituent Assembly seats, each allocated by proportional

representation through closed lists in multi-member districts. Al-Nahda had succeeded by portraying itself as the primary victim of Ben Ali's repression and aligning itself with the populist spirit of the uprising. It seemed to have benefited too from the return to religiosity in the previous decade (Haugbølle and Cavatorta 2012a, 21). In Sousse, the results broadly reflected the national trend: the movement won 34.3 percent of the vote and took four of the ten seats on offer. It won in fifteen of the sixteen electoral districts in the governorate, doing well in a mix of settings including M'saken, a small religious town to the south of Sousse, Hai Riadh, the lower middle-class suburb in the university district, Kondar, a thinly-populated rural area, and Sidi Abdelhamid, an industrial zone on the city's southern edge. Only in Hammam Sousse, the wealthy district of origin of Ben Ali, did al-Nahda come second, behind the National Destourian Initiative (al-Mubadara al-Wataniyya al-Dusturiyya), a party led by Ben Ali's former defence minister Kamel Morjane, who hoped to rehabilitate the former political elite but who fared poorly at the national level. Four Nahdawis from Sousse were elected to the assembly: Hamadi Jebali, head of the Sousse list and the candidate chosen as prime minister; Monia Ibrahim, the long-time activist and wife of Abdelhamid Jelassi; Zied Ladhari, a young lawyer born in 1975 who had spent a decade in exile in France; and Fattouma Attia, the businesswoman who later resigned in 2014. A fifth Nahdawi, Kamel Ben Romdhane, a former political prisoner from Kalaa Kebira, replaced Jebali in the assembly after he was made prime minister in December 2011.

Three years later, ahead of the second general elections on 26 October 2014, al-Nahda was in a much less favourable position. It had been forced out of government by popular protests following the assassinations of two politicians in February and July 2013, and had faced frequent criticism in the national media for the slow pace of economic

recovery.[62] It was now challenged by a more united opposition, in the shape of Nidaa Tounes, led by the veteran former interior minister Beji Caid Essebsi, who had grouped together former regime figures, leftists, and trade unionists in an anti-Islamist alliance. Even before the ballot, al-Nahda campaign organisers in Sousse feared a 'punishment vote' against them from poorer communities who still felt economically marginalised (Walid). Al-Nahda's private polling identified Nidaa Tounes as the main rival in Sousse, yet because there was so much infighting within Nidaa, including the resignation of the party's Sousse regional co-ordinator in December 2013 ("Le coordinateur régional" 2013), al-Nahda organisers believed they faced a poorly-organised opponent weakened by personality clashes and lacking grassroots depth.

When the Sousse regional bureau chose candidates for the election it prioritised popular activists from within the movement, rather than those who might have public standing in the city. In other parts of the country, al-Nahda made an overt appeal to the business community, as in the Sfax 2 constituency, where the list was led by Mohamed Frikha, an entrepreneur who had launched an airline but had never been an al-Nahda activist. Nidaa Tounes in Sousse took a similar approach, choosing candidates who were well-known public personalities including Ridha Charfeddine, who was president of the Étoile Sportive du Sahel football club, Zohra Idriss, a wealthy hotelier, and Faycel Khelifa, the head of the Étoile Sportive handball club. However, al-Nahda's Sousse bureau instead ran an inward-looking selection process. Ladhari, the young lawyer elected in 2011 who had been the movement's national spokesman, was picked as the lead candidate.[63] High on

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[62] Chokri Belaïd, an elected deputy from the Movement of Democratic Patriots, was shot dead near his home in Tunis on 6 February 2013. Mohamed Brahmi, a Nasserist political activist who led the People's Movement, was shot dead near his home on 25 July 2013. Both assassinations were blamed on Salafist cells, while political and media critics accused al-Nahda of being too lax in confronting Salafist violence.

[63] Ladhari, a fluent Arabic, French and English speaker born in M'saken in 1975, rose quickly through the ranks of the movement after 2011. He acted as national spokesman, then took the sole al-Nahda ministry in the 2015 government, and in July 2016 was promoted to be al-Nahda's secretary general.

the list were two women who were prominent within the movement: Monia Ibrahim, elected in 2011, and Afifa Makhlouf, the long-time activist who had lived in exile in France but who now led the women's section of the movement in Sousse. Also selected was Ajmi Lourimi, the former political prisoner and an intellectual in the movement. Other candidates were a lecturer in engineering, a schoolteacher, and two young female students. Some privately voiced criticism that no prominent Sousse personality figured on the list, but others were convinced that their superior organisational skills and a hefty, centrally-run publicity campaign would win out in the end.

The movement ran an energetic month-long campaign in the governorate, with three or four events a day, usually small rallies in local districts where candidates spoke to crowds of a few hundred at a time, as well as door-to-door electioneering. Candidates made much of the movement's history of resistance to the ousted authoritarian regime. Other parties opted for politics as spectacle, preferring less frequent rallies for which thousands of supporters were bussed in to wave flags at the party leader. One afternoon, the movement held a small rally on a patch of barren land in Hai 9 avril, a poor, working-class area of western Sousse. Four candidates sat on the stage in front of an audience of a few hundred, who waved al-Nahda flags and who joined the announcer in singing popular songs or chanting the movement's slogans, 'The People want al-Nahda Again' (*al-shaʿb yurīd al-Nahda min jadīd*) and 'Loving Tunisia is not just words' (*maḥabba Tunis mish klām*). Ladhari told the crowd:

> Our movement stood against oppression, our movement stood against dictatorship and monopolisation, and our movement was standing up when no one dared to stand up in that period, and therefore we say today after being liberated from oppression, we must know how to choose well, to choose people to govern us who will help us and stand with us. (2014a)

This much was in line with the position of the leadership, but local activists often went further and presented al-Nahda as the party defending a revolutionary cause that was now

imperilled by the return of former regime figures to political life. For example, during one door-to-door campaign outing, which began in a middle-class district near the Ghazali mosque in central Sousse, a 21-year-old al-Nahda campaigner tried to persuade a young man who had voted for Morjane in the last elections to reconsider his options: 'Are you with the parties of the former regime? Or are you with the parties of the revolution? At least say you'll vote with the revolution!' This stark binary accurately reflected the very real fears of local al-Nahda activists, who were angry about such a rapid return of the former political elite and long delays in the transitional justice process. The hostility of local activists was in sharp contrast to the leadership in Tunis, which refused to rule out a future coalition government with Nidaa.

Al-Nahda implicitly acknowledged its shortcomings in government when it titled its 2014 election manifesto 'Towards a rising economy and a secure country'. Promises of material and economic improvement dominated the party's speeches and public messages. The main campaign leaflet given out at rallies in Sousse gave a list of seventeen commitments for local change. These pledges addressed a mixed population of city-dwellers, businessmen, and farmers and included promises to: turn village councils into elected municipal bodies; rehabilitate the tourist sector; revitalise industrial zones; address public transport shortages and traffic jams; complete a local deep-water port project; turn the Sousse port into a tourist attraction and move commercial shipping elsewhere; modernise the fishing industry; improve services to farmers; review projects that harmed the environment, including runoff canals leading to the sea; and to create a southern entrance to the city. The emphasis was on local, technical projects for material improvement rather than any distinctively religious reshaping of society. They were men and women of 'technical aptitude', Ladhari said in a televised election broadcast (2014b). Nor was there much religious symbolism deployed. The election pamphlet began with the

invocation 'In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful' and ended with a Qurʾanic quotation, but precisely the same format was used in Nidaa Tounes' national manifesto, with the same invocation and another Qurʾanic quote to end. Indeed, Nidaa had taken a Qurʾanic phrase as the title of its election manifesto: 'The Accountable Pact' (al-ʿAhd al-Masʾul).[64] The primary difference was that al-Nahda had identified a series of local priorities on which to campaign, whereas Nidaa Tounes' Sousse candidates campaigned almost entirely on national issues: restoring 'respect for the state' (*haybat al-dawla*), fighting terrorism, and creating jobs.

Although al-Nahda's campaign seemed to offer little in the way of an explicit Islamist programme, there was a discreet morality in their narrative. There had already been months of public debate about how al-Nahda would reconcile its Islamic vision with those pressing for greater individual liberties, for example on freedom of speech, but these had been resolved, at least temporarily, in the constitution.[65] Instead what was presented here was an ethical agenda, a claim to a distinct value system that al-Nahda believed set it apart from its competitors. Thus in his speech at the Hai 9 avril rally, Ladhari presented al-Nahda activists as embodying such attributes as sincerity, principles, trust, loyalty, and 'love of the poor', while its opponents were merely seeking positions of power, privileges, and personal interest. The movement stood with the 'oppressed' and offered them 'dignity', he said (Ladhari 2014a). Two days later, Makhlouf addressed a small rally in Zaouiat Sousse by saying: 'You know who to choose: the one who will work for you, not the one who will exploit you; the one who will raise you up, not the one who will be arrogant to you' (Makhlouf 2014). Only occasionally was this ethical commitment linked explicitly to religion, and even then the Islamic element of al-Nahda's programme was

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[64] The title derives from verse 17:34, 'And fulfill the pact; surely the pact is called to account'.
[65] I have written elsewhere in more detail about al-Nahda's approach to protecting but limiting freedom of speech (see: McCarthy 2015).

broadly worded. At a rally in Hammam Sousse, Faouzi al-Mhiri, a schoolteacher and candidate, put his promises of educational reform in these terms:

> We are going to reform the educational system, consolidate its values, and take it back to the Arab-Islamic authenticity (*aṣāla*), because we believe that Islam with its great values is the real and essential engine of development, and of goodness and prosperity (*al-ṣalāh wa-l-falāh*). (al-Mhiri 2014)

The emphasis was not on establishing a religious order, although most al-Nahda activists admitted that remained a long-term ambition, but rather a community built around an 'authentic' identity that had previously been excluded by secularising post-colonial regimes. This was a dilution of al-Nahda's original vision, which was directed much more clearly at Islamising society, but it reflected an effort to adapt to the realities of political competition.

The election results were disappointing. Nationwide al-Nahda's share of the national vote dropped to 27.8 percent and the movement's bloc shrank to 69 seats in the 217-seat assembly. Its rival Nidaa won a 37.6 percent of the vote and with it 86 seats. In Sousse al-Nahda suffered an even greater fall in support, this time winning just 24.2 percent of votes and retaining only three seats (for Ladhari, Ibrahim, and Lourimi). Nidaa Tounes won the governorate taking five seats, while Afek Tounes, a centre-right party, and Morjane's Initiative took one seat apiece. Not only did al-Nahda's electoral support in Sousse drop by nearly 36,000 votes from three years earlier, but support for the parties most clearly aligned to the values of the former ruling party (Nidaa Tounes and the Initiative) rose substantially, by nearly 59,000 votes.[66] The results showed Al-Nahda's support was down in all the districts of the governorate, but especially in urban centres including downtown Sousse, Kalaa Kebira, and Akouda, even though these had long been

[66] The number of votes won by al-Nahda in Sousse fell from 86,590 in 2011 to 50,820. The number of votes for the Initiative in 2011 was 52,573 (Nidaa Tounes was not formed until a year later). In 2014, Nidaa won 102,604 votes, and the Initiative won 8,626, a combined total of 111,230 (ISIE 2014).

sites of Islamist activism. Meanwhile voter turnout in the governorate dropped from 55.3 percent in 2011 to at most 45.9 percent in 2014, and support for most of the smaller centrist parties collapsed.[67] The pattern in Sousse was reflected nationwide. Voter turnout was down and Nidaa attracted strategic voters, effectively polarising the electorate.

Even in the tone of the movement's carefully organised campaign in Sousse there were already signs of difference with the consensus-seeking, non-confrontational position of the leadership in Tunis. Local activists saw the return of former regime figures as their greatest challenge and as a personal threat to their community. They framed themselves again as defenders of the revolution, with only brief allusions to their Islamic distinctiveness. The nature of the challenge ahead meant their manifesto was about local technical, economic improvements. However, the failure of al-Nahda in government to answer pressing socio-economic demands was out of the control of the local organisation and worked against them.

6.4 Political party or religious movement?

The disappointment of defeat for al-Nahda members was compounded by the leadership's decision not to endorse a candidate in the subsequent presidential election, for which the first round was held on 23 November 2014. The movement had earlier chosen not to put forward a candidate for the post, for fear of being seen to dominate the political scene and of repeating the mistakes of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, which had been ejected from power by a populist coup in July 2013 and then brutally repressed. At first the al-Nahda leadership promised to back a 'consensus' candidate, but then opted for studied

[67] The overall number of votes cast in the Sousse governorate fell from 252,810 in 2011 to 209,984 in 2014 (ISIE 2012, 177; ISIE 2014). No updated number of eligible voters for 2014 has been provided by ISIE, meaning the estimate of turnout in 2014 is almost certainly slightly too high. This fall in turnout, which matched a nationwide pattern, came despite a major campaign to encourage eligible voters to register and to cast their ballots.

neutrality. In frustration, many Nahdawis and their supporters voted for Moncef Marzouki, the former president and CPR leader who had expressly appealed to them. In a second round run-off on 21 December, Essebsi beat Marzouki, including in Sousse, but voting patterns showed Marzouki was strongly supported in the poorer, rural south, where al-Nahda support tended to be strongest.

The leadership's avowed 'consensus approach' (*manhaj al-tawāfuq*) provoked resentment within the movement at the local level. Several al-Nahda activists described their support for Marzouki as a vote of protest against their leadership. Nabil, a former prisoner and now leader of a local al-Nahda bureau, said:

> It was a reaction from the base against the choices of the leadership and for the policies decided during the campaign. It wasn't about support for Marzouki, it was a message to the leaders of our movement. It was a message guaranteed to be received from the base to the leaders of the movement. (Nabil)

Nabil went on to resign his position as a bureau leader in January 2015, in exasperation at what he saw as a widening gap between the leadership and the Nahdawi base. He said voters were fearful that al-Nahda was becoming 'a big show' and was starting to resemble the RCD by seeking to dominate the political scene. A second frustration followed after the presidential election, when the movement leadership lobbied hard to be included in the Nidaa Tounes coalition government, eventually securing a minor role, in which Ladhari was made employment minister, and three al-Nahda deputies were given lesser posts. Again, many ordinary members were angered by the decision to ally with a party that had been so overtly hostile to al-Nahda. Some also feared Nidaa Tounes might force through a new wave of repression against their movement, which was a genuinely-held concern however unlikely it seemed in hindsight. In Tunis, Abdelhamid Jelassi even briefly stepped down in protest. Nabil, the bureau leader who resigned, said: 'We could have been in opposition and presented a model of a constructive opposition. That would have allowed us to restructure the movement, to rebuild it on a correct basis'. He blamed the decision to

ally with Nidaa Tounes on Ghannouchi directly, and compared it to Ghannouchi's decision in late 1987 to accept Ben Ali after his coup against Bourguiba. 'That wasn't the choice of the base at the time and nor was this. There was a choice by the leadership that was different to the choice of the base.'

As in the early 1990s, the same concerns returned about the movement's work being overwhelmed by a concentration on political goals. Although there was much evidence that Tunisia had experienced a rise in religiosity since the 2000s, many Nahdawis felt the population still had an inadequate understanding of Islam. They cast the priorities of their project in much the same way their predecessors had in the early 1970s, as if proselytising needed to start anew. As one experienced female activist in the Hai Riadh bureau put it:

> The first thing we must do is *daʿwa*. The movement won't succeed unless it has people who are well trained in *daʿwa*, with a strong belief and who are trained and convinced in Islamic thought. That comes before everything else. Then comes politics. And politics is the means not the end (*wasīla mush ghāyia*). It's the way we return to our Islam and apply it in this society. Our objective is not to win the presidency or enter government. No. That's just a tool to help us, to give us freedom to work in society, to spread this Islam and Islam will be applied again in Tunisia. Because in Tunisia we have come very far from Islam. (Kawther)

Her sense was of politics as winning the 'freedom' to proselytise in society, in other words providing the apparatus for an open competition of ideas. This was directed at what she perceived to be superficial understandings of the meaning of the hijab, and at the unexpected spread of Salafist movements, both violent and non-violent. Several mosques in Sousse remained under the influence of Salafist preachers, despite government attempts to reassert control. Often individual Nahdawis found themselves arguing with their new Salafist preachers. As one activist put it:

> We abandoned the mosques, and the Salafists came and took the mosques. They spread extremist ideas that we don't adopt. They used violence, excluding people. They don't believe in allowing opposing thoughts. They have a certain interpretation of Wahhabism, from Wahhabi clerics. They don't draw on the ʿulamaʾ of Zaytuna, for example, or Maliki jurisprudence, which is one of the

> specificities of the Maghreb. The problem in al-Nahda is that we let ourselves become too preoccupied with political work. (Sahbi)

There was a sense here of an urgent need to face competitive waves of Islamisation, a sense that al-Nahda's dominance as the primary representative of Islam in society was now being challenged. Political power, in this reading, was not seen as the objective but rather provided the structure through which the movement could freely pursue its Islamising mission in a way denied it for decades.

In practice, this meant many in the al-Nahda community wanted to put their effort into projects of social outreach, either through charitable associations, preaching organisations, or Qurʾanic study groups. A number of new religious charities emerged in 2011, particularly to help the thousands of Libyans flooding across the Tunisian border. This has been seen as the rise of a 'new Islamic social counter-power', which challenged the traditional social bloc linked to the Bourguiban nationalist elite (Soli and Merone 2013). Some of these charities overlapped with the al-Nahda community, including Attaouen (Jamʿiyyat al-Taʿawun wa-l-Tawasul al-Ijtimaʿi, the Association of Cooperation and Social Connection). Attaouen was established in Sousse in 2010 by Nejib Karoui, a doctor who had been an al-Nahda activist even though his father, Hamad Karoui, was a pillar of the ruling party and prime minister in 1989-99.[68] Karoui had been active in the MTI student group at the Faculty of Medicine in Tunis in the early 1980s and prayed at his local Sousse mosque, al-Ghazali, with activists like Mohamed Chemli and Hamadi Jebali, for whom he worked as an aide until leaving al-Nahda in 1993. Attaouen began in the late 2000s as an informal enterprise 'driven by religious feelings', Karoui said. A small group of likeminded friends cooperated to distribute food and second-hand clothes to poor

[68] A second charity with an informal link to al-Nahda was Marhama (Jamʿiyyat Marhama li-l-Masharʿ al-Khariyya wa-l-Ijtimaʿiyya, the Association of Compassion for Charitable and Social Projects), which was founded in Germany in 1999 by Mohsen Jendoubi, a Nahdawi exile. Another prominent association with no al-Nahda link was Tunisia Charity (Tunis al-Khariyya), run by Abdelmonem Daymi (Soli and Merone 2013).

communities during Ramadan and the Eid holidays. After 2011 the association grew rapidly. Soon, under pressure from media criticism, Karoui had to insist that employees (though not volunteers) could not contest elections or be known as active members of a political party. As he said:

> If we become identified politically, then it's no longer charity but working for political gain and the first objective of having Allah's reward is lost. And if you ask people for charity and you have a political party, they won't give to you. (Karoui)

Moreover, he was now critical of al-Nahda which he saw still acting with the inward-looking 'mentality of a sect' and failing to open up to external advice and cooperation. Yet, by 2014 Attaouen had scaled back its operations amid increasing media criticism of the motivations of Islamic charitable organisations. 'Charitable work has weakened a lot recently, because they're going after association after association . . . It's the demonisation of Islamists, the demonisation of al-Nahda,' Karoui said.[69]

A group of veiled women worked in one small Attaouen office in Hai Riadh, collecting used clothes and schoolbooks as well as financial donations which would be distributed to around 140 poor families in the district. Farida, the office organiser and a hospital nurse, had been active within the MTI community in the 1980s and, though she insisted Attaouen was 'an association, not an Islamic association', she framed her work in explicitly religious terms:

> Political work is for other people. We say our work is dedicated to God. There are layers in society: poor, rich, and middle class. In the Qurʾan it says the richest must help the poor. Social justice is in the Qurʾan and as a Muslim you apply the Qurʾan. (Farida)

[69] There were repeated efforts by different governments to close down mosques and religious associations that were deemed to be spreading extremist views. In mid-2014, after al-Nahda had left power, the technocratic government of Mehdi Jomaa shut 157 religious associations and two radio stations, an act Human Rights Watch described as 'disproportionate and arbitrary' (Human Rights Watch 2014).

She had faced criticism from her Nahdawi friends for not taking part in their political work, but after leaving the movement in the 1990s in order to keep her job she had decided not to return to al-Nahda after 2011.

> I devote myself just to this work, even Nahdawis blamed me for this. I told them, when I was young I lived for the political work and I loved it and devoted much time to the MTI and to al-Nahda. Then came the break of the 1990s and I retreated. I kept my job, I couldn't leave my job, and I hadn't studied just to stay at home . . . I like the al-Nahda movement, but I work independently now. There are no restrictions or conditions.

Again, here was the sense that there were more dimensions to the religious project after 2011 than offered by al-Nahda, with its focus on formal politics and the challenges that imposed.

Similar concerns about al-Nahda were evident elsewhere. In the Qurʾanic association in Hammam Sousse, established by Chokri in 2005, work had broadened significantly after the uprising. The association soon spread to two different sites, with around 300 students, young boys and girls and adult men and women, with classes focusing on Qurʾanic memorisation, recitation, and studies of Qurʾanic commentaries and Islamic belief and jurisprudence. On the walls of the school rooms were drawings by the children, or posters listing the five pillars of Islam, or the ninety-nine names of God, or with details of Arabic grammatical rules to be memorised. Chokri explained:

> We are trying to build a small society within the bigger society. There is a bigger society that has alcohol, corruption, nightclubs, and drugs, and we are trying to build a better society within that bigger society. It's the same project as the 1980s.

For Chokri, the urgency of Qurʾanic study lay with the problems caused by years of poor quality teaching from ineffectual state-appointed imams in the mosques. That had been replaced, he said, by an 'awakening' (*ṣaḥwa*) of religiosity but al-Nahda as a movement had failed to respond.

> We say as ordinary people that al-Nahda is zero. It's not relevant to us in the way it was before. It's a civil Islamic project, and that means there should be both change from the top down and from the bottom up . . . But al-Nahda is focusing

> more on the political issue than the religious issue at the moment, even though it's a religious movement. (Chokri)

He was particularly critical of al-Nahda's political alliance with Nidaa Tounes after the 2014 elections, at a time when government ministers were again talking of what he described as 'neutralising' mosques (*taḥyīd al-masājid*) in a way that the Ben Ali regime had done. Although many Nahdawis wanted to work on social outreach, in fact such *daʿwa* projects remained rather limited in Sousse. The movement focused its energies on political life and again felt a sense of an impending encroachment on its freedom to pursue an Islamising mission.

This growing unease at the base of the movement revived the idea, briefly considered and then postponed at the 2012 congress, of separating al-Nahda into a political party and a religious social movement. It was a question referred to internally as 'the ways of conducting the project' (*subul taṣarruf al-mashrūʿ*) or, informally, 'joining or splitting' (*al-waṣl aw al-faṣl*). In this way those who favoured political work could continue along the path of reinventing al-Nahda as a socially conservative civil political party that drew on an Islamic reference but also presented solutions to contemporary problems that would appeal to all Tunisian citizens. Simultaneously those who preferred a cultural, social, or religious *daʿwa* project could carry out their activism separately, without having to endorse pragmatic political compromises and in the hope of skirting any criticism of 'double discourse' or of seeking political gain through preaching.

Yet in 2013-14 there was also significant resistance to the idea. Many feared a separation might fatally weaken the political party and leave it isolated from its societal base. As Youssef, a local al-Nahda bureau leader, put it:

> This is one of the dangers of this solution: that there is no longer a social belt around the party, and the party will become like any other party, without human momentum around it, that's a real danger.

There was a sense that an al-Nahda political party could not survive without a deeper connection to individual Tunisians, which could only be ensured by a religious movement. The deeper reach of the movement also offered protection when al-Nahda was on the defensive against continued criticism in the assembly and in the media, particularly over accusations of links to violent extremism. More than this, there was the intellectual challenge represented by separation. After all, separation would finally undo the comprehensive nature of the Islamist project, which had united the religious and the political in one vision. Youssef feared separation would challenge their concept of the completeness of the Muslim character and might lead to a form of schizophrenia (*infiṣām*).

> The problem is that it's a functional separation, but not an intellectual one. The separation can't be intellectual unless we fall into the problem of asking ourselves when are we doing politics and when are we doing *daʿwa*. That's why I'm not totally with the idea of separation, because it's a negative idea and it will result in a split character. (Youssef)

Dividing the two implied a failure of the original project, even though it had been a project in which the actual relationship between the political and religious missions had never been as harmonious as imagined. However, even anxious Nahdawis like Youssef could not deny the urgency of the debate: 'There's a metamorphosis inside the party and we must face it. There is an essential, profound change inside the party.'

Such debates over structure also brought debates over purpose. Many Nahdawis in the post-2011 period struggled to define precisely what their movement now stood for or what it meant in practice to draw on an Islamic reference in a secular, civil state. Many resolved this challenge through the concept of 'freedom before the shariʿa'. Freedom meant protection from a return to the experiences of authoritarian repression that had so shaped the movement since 1981. Freedom, both political and economic, was also a necessary prerequisite in order to permit a free society in which al-Nahda could propose its cultural project and try to win support for a shariʿa-derived legal system. For even though

the movement had decided not to press for the application of shariʿa as a source of legislation in the new constitution, as individuals Nahdawis still held to the application of the shariʿa as a long-term goal. Yet they differed over what shariʿa should mean, who should apply it, and to whom it should be applied. For example, though it was commonplace to argue that the shariʿa should not be abbreviated in meaning to the amputation of the hand of a thief, one Sousse activist nonetheless argued:

> I am with the implementation of this legal punishment (*ḥadd*) for those who steal public money, because historically that's how this country was ruined. People in the centre of power had their hands on public money and swallowed so much without being held accountable. (Haythem)

Yet, another Sousse activist, a preacher and Consultative Council member, described it much more cautiously:

> The importance is to progress gradually towards the application of the Islamic shariʿa. First, its application cannot be by force. Second, the Islamic shariʿa is not merely laws or the cutting of the hands of thieves. It's more than that. It's deeper than that. (Kamel)

The challenge was to interpret what that deeper meaning ought to be. Ghannouchi's own philosophical innovation on this, as explained in his primary work *Public Freedoms in the Islamic State* (1993a), was to provide for popular participation in determining what in the shariʿa was timeless and fixed and what was open to reinterpretation in changing contexts. In Andrew March's words, it was for the people collectively 'to be the decider of how God's sovereignty is brought into the world' (2013, 313-4).

Among Sousse activists many relied on readings of the broader objectives of the shariʿa (*maqāṣid al-shariʿa*), such as that by the Zaytuna scholar Mohamed Tahar Ben Achour (1879-1973). Ben Achour brought new terminology to bear in developing new *maqāṣid* beyond the five established preservations of religion, life, lineage, intellect, and wealth, to include such additional and broad objectives as 'freedom', 'rights', 'civility', and 'equality' among others (Ibn Ashur 2011). Thus, as one activist put it:

> We believe that freedom is before the shariʿa, because humans are not Muslim without freedom. In the Qurʾan, God says there is no compulsion in religion, meaning that when man is free he can choose, and when he chooses he takes responsibility. So therefore freedom comes before shariʿa. (Bechir)

If there was no compulsion, then an individual should be free to choose and so freedom came first. This was the beginning of an inconclusive debate. It was still unclear what this freedom meant in practice, who was to define its limits, or indeed how it might differ from others' conceptions of freedom. Yet there was also an effort here to carve out new intellectual territory for the movement. As Walid, one of the senior Sousse leaders and a member of the Consultative Council, put it:

> Freedom, for example, is an Islamic value. When we say 'There is no God but God' and I pray to God, it's an announcement of your freedom from all other slaveries . . . And that's why we consider we are not like other Islamist movements. Other Islamist movements evaluate how close they are to achieving an Islamic project by the number of veiled women, or the number of women in *niqāb*, or the number of bearded men, or the number who frequent the mosque, but we as a political Islamic party, with a political thought that is more advanced than others, we evaluate our project by the extent to which we have achieved the supreme values of Islam. If we succeed in making the idea of freedom prevail and if everyone defends that, then I have approached much closer to Islam than someone who brings a million bearded men. (Walid)

This was not just freedom before the shariʿa, but a framing of freedom as situated within the Islamic discourse, and as superior to traditional Islamist identity symbols. Often though, this also meant returning to the comforting resonance of ideas of morality, cultural authenticity, and Arab-Islamic identity as defensive markers of difference. In this way the concept of freedom was both drawn from an Islamic reference and constrained by it. This challenged rival secular political movements, which Nahdawis considered to be defending a concept of freedom that was Western in origin, unlimited in scope, and 'alienating' for Tunisians. As Walid himself put it:

> There are limits that we don't exceed. Other, leftist factions see freedom without any limits. Our distinction is that we have an Islamic reference. God gave us freedom but in a clear framework of values that we shouldn't exceed: we ban adultery, alcohol, and so on. And that's what we are committed to. That's the Islamic reference.

The emphasis here was on establishing familiar limits to be placed on freedom, rather than on producing innovative new workings of the Islamist project that might offer a fresh response to the particular social, economic, political, and cultural challenges of a Muslim-majority nation newly democratising within a globalised economic context. As Ramadan argues: 'The religious reference has become a strictly reactive and a strictly protective one, directed primarily against the permissive excesses of the West and Westernizers' (2013).

Disappointing elections results and the strategic decisions that followed reignited a long-running debate about the question of structurally separating the *daʿwa* mission from the political project. Once again emerged the fear that political ambitions had become an end, rather than the means. A decision to separate also revealed the challenge of an incomplete intellectual evolution within the movement and the difficulty of deciding precisely how to enact the movement's new priorities.

Conclusion

A focus on the many strategic concessions and compromises made by the al-Nahda leadership in the months and years after the 2011 uprising has tended to miss the internal dynamics within a movement struggling both to rebuild itself and to redefine its project. The evidence from the al-Nahda community in Sousse reveals both the rapid rebuilding of the movement in the image of the MTI in the 1980s, but also the growing fragmentation of an organisation abruptly shifting from opposition to running a government at a moment of great change. Shadi Hamid argues that Islamist parties elsewhere in the region, at least in authoritarian contexts, have favoured their large charitable, educational, and preaching activities over electoral success: they 'historically privileged self-preservation over political contestation' (2014, 116). Yet, al-Nahda did the opposite. Here was a movement with much less developed charitable, educational, and preaching arms than other Islamist organisations and which privileged political contestation over a revival of its *daʿwa*

operations. The structural impact of this decision was to split the organisation into a religious movement and a political party, but this had an intellectual impact too, forcing individual Nahdawis to reassess their own understanding of the movement and their role within it.

Asef Bayat proposes that the post-Islamist turn produces a conceptual eclipse of the Islamism of the past towards a new discourse of inclusion and compromise fusing 'religiosity and rights, faith and freedom, Islam and liberty' (Bayat 2007, 11). Al-Nahda's discourse in the years after 2011 seemed in some ways to fit that tenor and there can be little doubt that a profound attempt was being made, however inconclusive it was, to marry the Islamising ideals of the movement with the ambition for freedom and the complex demands of the new political realities. Yet, as we have seen, such discursive shifts were also in evidence during previous periods of adaptation. Moreover, such adaptation was by no means unique to the Islamists but typical of all parties, secular and leftist too, which saw the need from the 1980s onwards and again after 2011 to accommodate the new vocabularies of freedom, democracy, citizenship, and human rights.

What the experience of al-Nahda here does demonstrate is that the tension within the movement between politics and preaching was long running but came to a head very quickly after the movement transitioned from opposition force to party of government, with all the pragmatism, compromising and politicking that this entailed. The debate over whether to adopt a structural separation is evidence that ideological adaptation and political pragmatism can have a significant cost. Adapting to changing political opportunities can bring not just advantages, but also the challenge of fragmentation. Members of al-Nahda took individual decisions during this period about how they saw the movement and their role in it, and these decisions were shaped by the actions of the leaders, as well as concern over the often hostile media battles that the new landscape of

Tunisian politics produced. The defining characteristics of the movement in the period after 2011 were less to do with an innovative post-Islamist ideological evolution, but rather problems of internal instability, individual disillusionment, and unexpected confusion about al-Nahda's own identity.

7 Conclusion

This thesis began by asking why the political and religious components of al-Nahda's Islamist project proved in practice to be so incompatible. It asked what were the mechanisms of mobilisation, what meanings Nahdawis gave to their actions, and why these meanings changed over time. Making felt experiences the central focus of inquiry reveals overlapping understandings of the movement's priorities. It demonstrates how awkward and contested has been the relationship between what the Nahdawis called their political work and their religious, social, and cultural Islamising project, the preaching work. This is a portrait of the movement that reflects the experiences of its ordinary members but that stands in contrast to the leadership narrative, often reproduced by scholars, which sees the movement as primarily political and engaged above all else in the pursuit of state power.

When the movement emerged in its first iteration, as the Islamic Group in the 1970s, its focus was on faith, morality, and behaviour, as understood and articulated through a project of *da'wa*. That in turn built an imagined solidarity, a subcultural community of shared values, reinforced by a network of charismatic individuals who spread their influence through schools, universities, mosques, and local communities. Even as a political project was developed by some in the movement leadership from the early 1980s, this research shows just how significant the subculture of faith, morality and behaviour remained at the local level in Sousse. This subculture reinforced the Islamist community and created new expressions of their collective imagined solidarity. Although scholars often ascribe the resilience of Islamist movements elsewhere to their organisational skills, through the grassroots depth of carefully structured movements or the outreach of charitable social activities, the Tunisian Nahdawis could not draw on such resources during the twenty years of repression and social exclusion in the Ben Ali years.

Instead, they relied on their understanding of the Islamist project, the network of ties it created, and some discreet activism on the periphery of the movement. This had an unanticipated effect: it broadened the differences between those who favoured political participation for reform conducted at the state level and those who favoured a project of reform directed at the society level. In the years since 2011, these differences expanded so much that by 2016 al-Nahda felt compelled to separate its political project, the *ḥizb*, from its religious, social, and cultural work. This 'functional specialisation', as the movement described it, signified an intellectual identity crisis, a profound difference of views over what it meant to propose an Islamist project in the newly democratising Tunisia. The apparent ease with which the decision to separate passed at the May 2016 congress, with 80.8% of delegate votes, belied tensions, debates, and ambiguities reaching back many years (Harakat al-Nahda 2016d).[70]

At a time when discussions of contemporary Islamist movements too often slide back into reductive debates about the compatibility of Islam and democracy, this thesis instead casts new light on the internal tensions at the heart of the Islamist project, which combines political and religious aspirations in a singular 'comprehensive' vision. I do not argue there is an inherent pathology at the heart of Islamism, nor that Islamism itself has finally failed. Rather, I propose that Islamist movements like al-Nahda are adaptive to their changing environment. For al-Nahda those adaptations resulted from, and in turn inspired, competing narratives of meaning within the movement. This narrative competition produced phases of fragmentation and intellectual rethinking so that the project was constantly updated, most recently and most profoundly with the 2016 separation.

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[70] All the decisions at the congress were passed with similarly large majorities after months of preparatory work behind the scenes to persuade delegates to come as close as possible to a consensus decision. In addition, Ghannouchi was re-elected president of the movement with 800 votes, against 229 for his nearest rival, Fathi Ayadi, the head of the Consultative Council (Harakat al-Nahda 2016c).

Most accounts of the al-Nahda movement and its forerunners, the Islamic Group and the MTI, have focused on elite-level bargaining and confrontation between the movement's leaders and the regime. These leaders are seen as promoting either a cultural challenge to the post-independence secularising regimes, or reacting to the failure of regime-led modernisation. Their goal is portrayed as the capture of state power through a political project. In sometimes rather structural readings, Islamist leaders are seen as deploying Islamic framing narratives to take advantage of changing political opportunities (Alexander 2000; Allani 2009). This thesis, however, offers a fresh interpretation of the movement. The evidence from a detailed study at the local level identifies as the primary mechanism of mobilisation an innovative project to transform daily practices and understandings of faith and to build a new identity. What drew individuals in was not personal calculations about the benefits that might accrue by joining a political movement targeting state power. Instead, men and women were drawn to the transcendental idea that through correct belief, behaviour, and morality their lives and their society might be transformed. This idea was reinforced through informal but robust networks. Certainly, state-level political ambitions were an element of the overall project for some, but it was the ambition for societal change that drove the movement at the local level. This understanding of the Islamist project aligns with those who seek out the often less visible, daily lived practice of religious faith in other contexts (Mahmood 2005; Ismail 2006b), and what Cihan Tuğal identifies in Turkish Islamism as 'silent movement work on everyday practices' (2009, 451).

This silent work began with mosque discussion circles but quickly spread to study groups, sports events, and a focus on morality and ethical behaviour to remedy what activists perceived to be a spiritual vacuum in society. In later years these practices crystallised into a distinct subculture that forged new patterns of marriage, music, and

prayer, and in which individuals gave each other financial and practical assistance even as they found themselves straining relations with their own families. The era of repression under the Ben Ali regime in the 1990s and the 2000s dismantled the subcultural community in practical terms, but it reinforced a sense of the moral and ethical project because it was the only remaining outlet for Islamist expression. Nahdawis reimagined the project as individuals and sought sanctuary in morality and correct comportment in line with religious commitments like prayer and fasting. As Youssef, the former prisoner from Hammam Sousse described it, the Nahdawis were 'living Islam in our daily lives'; Nabil, another ex-prisoner, said they drew on their 'stock' of religious morals. After the 2011 uprising, there was a concerted effort to recreate the process of cultivation, education and training that had existed in the 1980s before the crackdown, but these efforts were swamped by the challenges the movement faced as it took part in the formal political process for the first time, winning and then relinquishing political power.

Social movements are considered to make meanings through three broad mechanisms: framing contentious politics, meaning creating an interpretative scheme of the outside world for their followers; constructing collective identities, which includes setting boundaries between 'us' and 'them'; and reflecting, capturing, and shaping emotions (Tarrow 2011, 142-3). Certainly, al-Nahda drew on all three of these mechanisms, but it also shaped a particular pattern of behaviour, forged by shared practices of faith and morality. This notion of daily practice seems particularly relevant in the case of Islamist or pietist movements (Mahmood 2005), but remains understated in the social movement literature (for one exception, see: Smith 1996). The most important way in which the al-Nahda movement and its forerunners forged their collective project was through an idealised understanding of correct behaviour drawing on a renewed attention to faith and prayer. This, in turn, contributed to framing the competition for an 'authentic'

Arab-Islamic identity against the secularising authoritarian regimes, or to constructing a collective identity in a subcultural community, or to shaping emotions of commitment, fellowship, defiance, and the sense of starting life anew. However, it was the daily practices that came first.

Al-Nahda's work on societal transformation was different to the formal political project but it was not apolitical. Through daily practices it challenged prevailing norms of behaviour, ritual, and dress. Changing daily behaviour was part of a broader political struggle in a context in which the state constantly intervened in and regulated social and religious norms. After 2011, Nahdawis frequently remarked how their society had grown more religious, how contemporary wedding ceremonies often resembled the 'Islamic' marriages they had first introduced four decades earlier, and that the preamble of the 2014 constitution made explicit reference for the first time to the 'teachings of Islam' and 'our Arab-Islamic identity' (Republic of Tunisia 2014). This is not to ascribe these changes solely to al-Nahda's societal project, for there are many other reasons that explain the presence of public signs of religiosity. Instead, it is to demonstrate that the movement saw itself as locked in an ongoing competition to transform society. In part, this was a competition with the state, because both the Bourguiba and Ben Ali regimes controlled religious institutions and discourse, claiming the sole right to interpret Islam in an effort to monopolise religious symbolism. When Bourguiba intervened in 1981 to try to enforce the Ramadan fast by closing cafes, this was in competition with the newly emerging Islamist trend. When Ben Ali made his superficial changes after the coup, returning some autonomy to the Zaytuna mosque-university and allowing state radio and television to broadcast the call to prayer, this too was in competition with the Islamist movement. This competition also explains the nature of the often highly-polarised debates between Islamists and secularists in the post-2011 transition. As Zeghal notes, these debates were

not about what form the new state structure should take, since all agreed on a republican electoral democracy, but rather were about 'the "ways of life" of Tunisians' and their different concepts of freedom, belief and conduct (2013, 255). When these debates seemed engulfed by questions of identity, it was not some superficial distraction from more tangible political questions but rather the continuation of a long-running symbolic competition. For, as Sami Zemni writes, these 'symbolic discussions are political battles over historical memory' (2015, 3).

This chapter highlights the prominent themes that emerge from this research and demonstrates how they help explain the separation of al-Nahda into party and movement. It looks at how other Islamist movements in the region have dealt with similar structural changes and what lessons they might offer for al-Nahda's future.

7.1 Between politics and preaching

The first contribution of this thesis is to demonstrate the surprisingly contested relationship between al-Nahda's political ambitions for control of the state and its preaching project, by which I mean the social, cultural and Islamising mission of *daʿwa* outreach. This questions the movement's own 'comprehensive' understanding of its project as intertwining both elements in one innovative proposition. Instead, the evidence in this thesis reveals a structural and an intellectual tension was present in the movement from the early 1980s, when some in the leadership first pursued the politicisation project. This tension was shaped by the leadership's confrontation with the Ben Ali regime in the late 1980s and the long period of repression that followed. It finally came to a head as the movement adapted to the post-2011 democratic transition. The primary fractures within the movement were not between 'hardliners' and 'moderates', or between a younger generation and veterans, or indeed between those who remained in Tunisia during the repression and those who escaped to exile. Instead, individuals tended to divide between those who favoured politics

and those who favoured preaching, depending how they understood and had experienced the identity and priorities of their movement. This debate was foremost in the minds of the Nahdawis I met in Sousse during the fieldwork for this research in 2013-14.

Al-Nahda was not unique among Islamist movements in facing this tension. In Egypt since the 1980s there had been growing differences within the Muslim Brotherhood between an old guard and a younger generation of self-styled 'reformists' about how power was distributed and on questions of political and ideological pluralism (Wickham 2013, 67-70). The reformists, Wickham argues, were influenced not by political participation so much as by debates and cooperation with individuals outside the Islamist movement. These differences pushed some out of the Brotherhood in pursuit of a reformist political project through the new al-Wasat party, as the old guard reinforced their authority. A similar debate emerged in the months after 2011 within Egyptian Salafist movements about how to balance political and preaching aspirations. In the new political climate, Salafist groups considered themselves in direct political competition with the Brotherhood. Gradually, the Nour party in particular became an autonomous political force separating itself from religious Salafism, a development that triggered an internal power struggle between those favouring the religious shaykhs and those favouring political autonomy (Lacroix 2012, 7). The party's pragmatism proved costly, with internal and external disputes over the party's democratic commitments, as well as intra-Salafist feuds and splits.

The separation between politics and preaching that we see in al-Nahda and elsewhere appears to mirror Roy's failure of political Islam thesis, in which he sees Islamist movements splitting into normalised nationalist political parties advocating elections, coalitions, and democracy on the one hand, and morality-focused activism in the private domain, which he calls 'neofundamentalism', on the other (1994). However, this

framework does not precisely capture the experience of al-Nahda. First, it suggests that at some stage there is a clear chronological break between the comprehensive Islamist mission of the past, and, once that has 'failed', the new era characterised by the political-neofundamentalist split. The evidence from the Tunisian case, however, is that even from its very start in 1981 the comprehensiveness of the Islamist mission was contested within the organisation. The political and the preaching wings co-existed awkwardly for more than three decades before the formal rupture. Second, the binary split that Roy describes does not capture the full range of fragmentation that took place within the Tunisian movement. Some, indeed, were clearly drawn to a political project of competing as a national political party in a civil, democratic system, while some, in line with Roy, were drawn back to the original project of morality-focused activism. However, the Tunisian case shows others still clung to the original comprehensive idea of the project and sought to be active in both trends. Others conceived of a political project that was strategically much more oppositional than the movement's consensus-seeking political leaders. Instead, they championed the secular goals of the uprising, including social justice, regional equality of development, and accountability for past crimes, issues that had little to do with the Islamist project. Still others left (or chose not to re-join) the movement in order to be active not in formal politics but in local and national civil society groups that were defined not by a religious zeal but by a different discourse of human rights, or local development. Further fragmentation is likely to follow in the years ahead once the formal party-movement split has settled and it has become clear where the real balance of power in the organisation now lies. Third, Roy's framework explicitly considers the political project in terms of the capture of the state, rather than acknowledging that the societal *da'wa* project also has political implications given that it seeks to challenge and redefine norms in the public sphere. Islamists are politically active well beyond formal elite-level politics. In this

vein, others have noted how we should consider the political field in the Middle East as broader than the state and elites (Zubaida 2009, 145-6) and that the state has expanded its power into many areas of social life, including religion (Hirschkind 1997, 13; Mahmood 2005, 193-4). Thus Islamists, like other activists, compete in a 'struggle over people's imaginations—habits of the mind, the heart, and of public space that help shape people's ideas of the common good' (Eickelman and Piscatori 2004, xv).

How, then, can we explain this contested relationship between politics and preaching within the movement? When the MTI proposed its 'comprehensive conception of Islam' in 1981 this was an idealistic vision. Even in that first press conference, the movement admitted that this proposition was made up of different strands: the primary goal was explicitly presented as cultural, social, and intellectual before it was political. However much the movement hoped to interweave all these threads, it was clear from the start that this was a quixotic formulation. The political project meant striving to establish some form of Islamic state, but there was never any precise definition of what this state would look like, how it would work in practice, or how the authoritarian post-independence Tunisian state might be transformed into an Islamic configuration. This is not to argue that the proposition of Islamism was so inchoate as to be without substance. Instead, it is to pay detailed attention to the inherent friction that lay within what was an ideal project from the outset and to track that friction as the movement as developed and adapted over time. Camau and Geisser argue the movement's 'intrinsic ambivalence' was shaped by the particular Tunisian experience and so reflected a fundamental ambivalence within the simultaneously reformist and authoritarian project of Tunisian elites since the nineteenth century (2003, 288). It was this 'authoritarian syndrome' that the Islamists had not left behind, they argue.

Although the movement maintained a political ambition since the early 1980s, it barely took part in the political process until after the 2011 uprising, apart from some discreet negotiations between the movement leadership and the Mzali premiership in the early 1980s and its brief participation in the April 1989 elections. The comprehensive project was not rigorously tested in practice until after 2011. Once al-Nahda was allowed entry into competitive pluralism with the elections of October 2011, it was very quickly confronted by the contradictions inherent in its plan. As Hamid argues, Islamists fall prey to the 'temptations of power', which distort their priorities and undermine their 'delicate balance' of preaching and politics (Hamid 2014, 15). Indeed, temptations of power undo non-Islamist parties too. Soon the question of separating the political and the religious emerged as the central debate within al-Nahda, eventually culminating in a formal separation.

Yet, the comprehensive project was not merely idealistic but also rather useful in its ambiguity in those early years. This plasticity allowed the movement to maximise its mobilising potential, drawing in as wide a range of supporters as possible and presenting itself as engaged in a broad array of interests beyond the question of identity and religion to also encompass democratic, social, economic, and even class aspirations. This explains its explicit alignment in 1981 with the 'oppressed' and the idea of a fair distribution of wealth, as well as its appeal at that early stage to labour unions (Harakat al-Ittijah al-Islami 2012a; Alexander 2000, 471-2). Such broad ambiguity was necessary given that the movement saw itself in direct competition with not just rival opposition parties, but with the modernising post-independence regime as well. The dual project allowed the movement to mobilise informal networks at the local level with one discourse, while trying to engage in competition with the political elite and the national media using another discourse. The pursuit of legalisation was an effort to avoid being pushed to the margins. It

allowed individuals with different priorities and different understandings of the challenges ahead to co-exist within one organisation.

The contest within the movement between political and preaching ambitions represents a form of political adaptation, in which the movement reflected on its experience and drew lessons. This is what has been characterised elsewhere as 'political learning', meaning the modification of beliefs or tactics as a result of crises, frustrations, and dramatic changes in environment (Bermeo 1992, 274). I do not argue that the movement always drew the 'right' lessons from its experience. Nor do I impose on its historical trajectory a normative, teleological reading in which it 'evolved' from religious movement to opposition force to democratic actor (even though the movement often uses the concept of evolution in precisely this way in its own public discourse). Rather, I argue that Islamists, like any other social movement, change their strategic aims and alter course in their activism depending on changing contexts and varied interpretations of past actions. In al-Nahda's case, different trends within the movement learned different lessons from the repression of the early 1990s. Movement leaders, who had proposed reconciling with the Ben Ali regime, were motivated to compromise their Islamising ambitions after 2011 for fear of a return to repression. They saw political pragmatism and inclusion in coalition government, whatever the cost, as the strongest protection against a return to exclusion. However, others took a different path. In the 2000s, inside Tunisia, they worked with non-Islamists in human rights associations or in other opposition parties to challenge the authoritarian regime with a cross-party, rights-based discourse. They often continued such civil society work after 2011. Thus, for some in the movement, the effect of repression and social exclusion was to encourage a new interpretation of the political project that reached beyond al-Nahda to embrace a wider discourse of human rights. Many others, of course, stayed away from all political and civil society activity altogether under Ben Ali because

of the punishing weight of repression and social exclusion. For them, the lesson of the confrontation was that the political ambitions of their leaders had destroyed the years of working to build an Islamist subculture in society. In their isolation they reimagined what it meant to be Islamist when it was no longer possible to organise as a group. For many it meant returning as individuals to the movement's original project of morality and correct behaviour. The different conclusions drawn by separate trends within the movement help explain why the differences between politics and preaching remained so animated within the movement.

Al-Nahda's project did not embody in practice the singular comprehensive vision that the movement had first theorised. Politics and preaching proved to be conflicting and ultimately irreconcilable goals, rather than interdependent and cohesive. This, after all, had been an idealistic and untested proposition which soon unravelled once al-Nahda entered free political competition after 2011. Yet ambiguity served a purpose at the particular moment that the movement was expanding in the 1980s, and the internal debates it triggered were an attempt to adapt to changes in the political environment. Even though al-Nahda has often been regarded by scholars as primarily a political movement, it had a parallel preaching dimension, whose ideas were to prove crucial during the years of repression.

7.2 Resilience under repression

A second contribution of this thesis is to fill a gap in the scholarly literature by uncovering the sources of al-Nahda's resilience during the years of repression from the early 1990s until 2011. The paradox of al-Nahda is that it quickly re-emerged in the weeks after the fall of Ben Ali despite two decades of jail, exile, and social exclusion. The movement had been unable to rely on those elements elsewhere considered vital to Islamist resilience, including a structured movement, activism in professional associations, and grassroots welfare

activities. Instead, what was most important in the Tunisian case was how robust the movement's informal networks proved and how individuals maintained and adapted their idea of the Islamist project.

Nahdawis were not simply recipients of state-mandated prison terms and social exclusion. In prison, even as the authorities suffocated the Nahdawi prisoners through a range of coercive practices, activists eventually found the space to discuss their experiences. There were disagreements about why their movement had entered into confrontation and whether their responses had been appropriate, but these also served as a process of intellectual revival of spirit and an effort to keep the idea of the Islamist project alive. In some cases, the prison cell also became a site of physical and material struggle and a location in which individuals could begin to reclaim their dignity. Family visits, though burdensome, allowed relatives to mix, share stories, and offer mutual comfort. These connections kept alive the social ties that had bound the community together so tightly before the years of repression.

In the years after prison, when Nahdawis found themselves facing social exclusion and a newly inferior social status, they were forced to rethink for themselves what their Islamist belonging meant to them as individuals. The associational work that did take place, in human rights groups or other political parties, happened at the periphery of the movement and served to pull al-Nahda in new directions, encouraging cross-party activism and a new human rights discourse. At the same time, a new generation of young men and women were drawn to the Islamist project either through parental influence or on personal spiritual quests. Though these new supporters were modest in number, their debates, particularly with the nascent Salafist movement, and their strong opposition to the Ben Ali regime injected different energies into the movement. These new elements emerged at a time when the cautious rump leadership pushed for reconciliation with the authorities and

slowly began to regroup. Al-Nahda had disappeared as a structured hierarchical organisation, but it remained as a collection of ideas of Islamism, even as the movement disaggregated into its diverse components. One primary result of this fragmentation was the growing realisation that the movement's original Islamising project had suffered at the cost of its political ambitions.

What continued to bind these individuals together in their project was an informal but robust series of networks. These networks were first built in study circles at particular mosques in the 1970s, and in school dormitories or on university campuses, hence the pocket of Islamist support in the faculties of medicine and law in Sousse. Individual teachers and charismatic preachers helped strengthen these bonds. They explain why pockets of Islamist support emerged in particular schools in Sousse, like the Lycée de Garçons, or in particular nearby villages, like Chorbane, the small rural village that produced half a dozen prominent Islamist figures. Men and women from within these networks sometimes married each other, further cementing community ties. These local level networks came first, before the structural organisation of the movement. They represented concrete steps towards the building of a subculture, or an imagined solidarity, that reached beyond shared daily practices into a community building project. Studying one local community of activists over a long historical time frame has shown just how resilient those social ties remained over several decades, even as individuals within the networks disagreed over the movement's tactics, strategies, and identity. These networks perpetuated the shared vision of the societal project, a vision that proved remarkably durable from the early 1970s until the post-2011 environment.

Most importantly the network ties survived during the two decades of repression. This thesis argues that the key to the movement's survival was not the formal hierarchy, the schematic *organigramme* so often studied and mapped, of local cells, regional leaders,

a national consultative council and an executive bureau. Instead, resilience began with the connective tissue of interpersonal networks within this hierarchy that had been forged in earlier years at school, or in mosques, or in local communities. It was these networks that provided the basis for the early efforts at reorganisation that began to emerge in the late 2000s, and which enabled communication between al-Nahda leaders elsewhere in the country and the local networks in Sousse. These networks suddenly became visible again in the rapid rebuilding of the movement in the weeks after January 2011.

These were networks that were created around shared values, daily practice, and a collective identity, rather than through formal organisational hierarchies. Such social interaction has now been acknowledged as playing a role in social movements as a site of creation and change and in forging the dynamics of contentious politics (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001, 22). As Tarrow puts it, 'interpersonal' networks operate as 'the sites for the normative pressures and solidary incentives out of which movements emerge and are sustained' (Tarrow 2011, 124). However, the case of al-Nahda in Sousse also demonstrates how flexible these networks can be. Close personal ties seem to have endured despite individual differences of opinion about the strategy of the al-Nahda project. Thus those former members who chose not to re-join the movement after it was legally authorised in 2011 were not rejected from these networks. The networks seemed flexible enough to accommodate a range of strategic differences because they united together behind a shared experience, including a shared experience of repression, as well as the original Islamising mission. This explains why a former Nahdawi, Tahar, who in 2014 was working in a civil society association, could say of his decision not to rejoin the movement after 2011: 'I respect al-Nahda and at heart I'm with them but I'm not a member'. However, these networks were not immune from difficulty. In the post-2011 environment their members were increasingly middle aged and continued to draw on their

youthful experience from the 1970s and 1980s. They struggled to replicate their networks among a younger generation, for whom the experience of subculture community building under the Bourguiba or early Ben Ali regimes carried little resonance. The younger generation lacked, as one Nahdawi put it, the sense of 'familial belonging' (Nabil). Another former political prisoner, describing the context of intense national-level pressure on the movement, lamented the lack of youth in his local al-Nahda branch. He complained:

> The local situation of the movement is that it is spending from its previous stock (*raṣīd*). It has a stock of people, of ideas, of views, of capabilities that it is investing in, investing to excess sometimes, under pressurised conditions and sometimes it loses many potential capabilities because of this. (Hedi)

The formerly resilient networks were now aging, drawing on their old reserves, and struggling to regenerate themselves.

Those Nahdawis who remained in Tunisia under Ben Ali were subject to harsh prison sentences and severe social exclusion once they returned to their homes. Yet, there is evidence of resilience, built on the persistence of the idea of the Islamist project, reinforced by social networks and activism on the periphery of the movement. This resilience explains why al-Nahda was able to return so quickly in 2011 after what had seemed like a two-decade absence. However, the new circumstances that suddenly erupted in the wake of the popular uprising brought not just the opportunity to rebuild but also the challenge to adapt.

7.3 Adapting by separating

The case of al-Nahda demonstrates how an Islamist organisation makes strategic and intellectual adaptations as its surrounding political and social environment changes. These adaptations show flexibility but they also incur costs, particularly to the stability of the organisation and the coherence of its vision. Until the repression of the 1990s, the movement had managed to combine its political and preaching activism in one

organisation, though as I have demonstrated there were always tensions in this project. This ambiguity seemed to resist those efforts to categorise Islamist movements by their attitude to the state, in which statists are seen as having ambitions to acquire state power, while non-statists either avoid politics or have a vision of a community not bound to the modern nation state (Volpi and Stein 2015). A better explanation of the logic behind the organisation's structural ambiguity would be to consider the MTI/al-Nahda of the 1980s as reflecting not some transnational Muslim Brotherhood organisational model, but rather the mirror image of the structure of Tunisia's own ruling party (Camau and Geisser 2003, 284). In what Camau and Geisser call this 'unconscious imitation', the Islamists built a movement with branch organisations across the country, centralised around a president, and reaching into social sectors that in many ways mimicked the ruling party of Bourguiba and Ben Ali. This accommodated the movement's twin ambitions of capturing power and reforming society. When al-Nahda rebuilt itself after the fall of Ben Ali in 2011, it revived the organisation by again using that single political-preaching structure and thus operated under the ambiguous name the Party of the Movement of al-Nahda. However, because of the unprecedented demands of the democratic transition, the political work again overwhelmed efforts to revive the programmes of *daʿwa* outreach. Some charitable, preaching, and Qurʾanic associations were loosely linked to the movement, but al-Nahda had not successfully recreated the grassroots organisation that existed in the 1980s. Soon the question of separation emerged, and in al-Nahda's most challenging adaptation yet, it eventually decided in May 2016 to divide itself into a conservative political party and a religious and cultural social movement.

The newly-described political project was the latest stage in an intellectual adaptation. At the moment of the split, Ghannouchi told *Le Monde* that the Islamist project had been defined in earlier years by its challenge to dictatorship and to what he called

'secularist extremism' (*l'extrémisme laïc*) (Bobin 2016). Those two threats, in his view, had now passed. Thus, he said: 'There is no longer a justification for political Islam in Tunisia'. Al-Nahda gave a more detailed account of this new stance in its concluding statement to the 2016 congress:

> The party of the al-Nahda movement has in practice gone beyond all the justifications used by those who consider it part of what is called 'political Islam' and this widely-used label does not express the reality of its current identity nor does it reflect the substance of its future project. Al-Nahda considers that its work is within an authentic effort to form a broad trend of 'Muslim democrats', who reject any contradiction between the values of Islam and the values of modernity. (Harakat al-Nahda 2016a)

Here we find a self-reflective movement explicitly rejecting the labels applied to it by both Western scholars and Tunisian political rivals, labels long acknowledged as artificial and often confusing constructs (Denoeux 2002, 56). Though al-Nahda was partly portraying itself as unthreatening, this was also a rethinking of what it meant to be an Islamist movement that competed within a democratic, pluralist system for control over a civil, not theocratic, state and that did not seek the immediate implementation of the shariʿa. It was the latest stage in a long intellectual debate that reached back to Lourimi's proposition of a 'battle of renewal' and beyond. There were different semantic formulations of this conceptual shift. Ghannouchi had previously described al-Nahda as no longer Islamist but rather a 'civil party with an Islamic reference' (al-Jamaoui 2012). Others talked of 'a national party that is the heir to a movement of religious, political and social reform' (al-Naqati 2015). By 2016, Ghannouchi and others were using the indistinct term 'Muslim democrats' (Ounissi 2016). They positioned themselves as the antithesis of violent Islamic groups who threatened Tunisian security, a framing that recalled how movement leaders had previously tried to offer themselves as a bulwark against violent Salafists in the late 2000s. The movement insisted this intellectual shift did not mean the 'secularisation' of al-Nahda, though that was precisely what some Nahdawis feared (Zeitoun 2016). The Islamic

reference would remain in the political project, but it was now defined through what al-Nahda called a '*maqāṣidī* understanding of the Islamic reference' (Harakat al-Nahda 2016a), referring to the idea of the broader objectives of the shariʿa (*maqāṣid al-shariʿa*). Al-Nahda defined the Islamic reference as a 'programme of reform' (*manhaj li-l-iṣlāh*) and a 'guiding force' (*quwwa tawjīhiyya*), but one that was still linked to the holy texts through a revivalist reading (*qirāʾa tajdīdiyya wa ijtihādiyya*) of the Qurʾan and sunna (Harakat al-Nahda 2016a).

Though I have argued that the post-Islamist hypothesis does not align with the movement's historic development, it is useful here in explaining the challenges al-Nahda faced in drawing up its political programme after 2011. The movement's adaptation did not divest it of an Islamic reference, but rather recast the role of Islam and asserted a cultural Islamic identity in its discourse. This is the point made by Roy when he sees religious norms being remoulded as conservative values (2012, 17). He argues that the religious reference has become a 'conservative sociocultural agenda' and that the new ideology is not a blueprint for ruling but an 'emotional and vague narrative' most likely to centre on censorship and gender issues (Roy 2013, 17,14). Similarly, Bayat notes that what he considers the post-Islamist turn remains largely untested in relation to individual liberties of minority rights, gender rights and freedom of thought, religion, and lifestyle (2013, 27). Indeed, the debates among al-Nahda's political leaders after the fall of Ben Ali centred on this question: the challenge of what it meant to adopt religious values as references and markers of cultural identity while not enforcing them as explicit principles of law.

Al-Nahda seemed to be pushing for a rather strict structural separation between party and movement. Party leaders would not be allowed to hold positions of leadership in civil society groups, or to act as preachers. However, much was still to be negotiated about

the relative weight and influence between the party and the movement and how easily individual Nahdawis would be able to cross between the two in their activism. Some senior figures resigned from the movement within weeks of the May 2016 congress. Mohamed Taher Chokri, the head of the movement's Sidi Bouzid regional bureau, left in protest at what he called 'clan-like' manoeuvrings among the senior leadership during the conference ("Démission du secrétaire général" 2016).

The organisational separation of the political and preaching projects in 2016 was the culmination of many years of internal debate and disagreement, dating back to well before the democratic transition. It was the latest effort at adaptation, and was not merely a structural decision designed to allay the criticisms of political rivals but a redefinition of what it meant to draw on an Islamic reference for a political project. It was simultaneously ambitious and ambiguous.

7.4 Lessons from elsewhere

Since 2011 al-Nahda has been particularly conscious of comparisons to other movements elsewhere in the region. In the months leading up to the 2016 party-movement separation, it invited a range of Islamist speakers to Tunisia to advise on organisational change. Indeed, the experience of other Islamists suggests some of the challenges that lie ahead for al-Nahda, both intellectually and structurally.

Nahdawi leaders often drew similarities between their movement and European Christian democrats, which explains their choice of the term 'Muslim democrats' in 2016. There are some parallels, including a shared cultural conservatism and a wider social movement that includes charitable, youth, and educational organisations (Hale 2005). However, there are differences too. Christian democracy emerged in late 1940s Europe as an effort to salvage the Catholic church after the war and in opposition to communism and fascism, a context quite different to the gradual transformation of Islamist movements.

Christian democracy developed at a time when Christian religious observance was contracting, whereas Islamic observance in Muslim-majority countries like Tunisia today remains strong.

There are more useful comparisons to be made in terms of intellectual adaptation with Turkey's Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi, AKP). The AKP claimed to represent 'conservative democrats' and marked an intellectual break with the previous Islamist formation, the Welfare Party (Refah Partisi), which had been dissolved in 1998. Indeed, this similarity was a connection regularly made in the months after the 2011 uprising by Ghannouchi, who described the AKP as the 'closest comparison' to al-Nahda (Moshiri 2011). The AKP offered a programme of development and democracy, placing itself in the tradition of the Turkish centre-right (Tuğal 2013, 128). Al-Nahda's approach to consensus and its coalition with Nidaa Tounes reflected a similar conservatism. In other ways, the AKP moved further to the political centre than al-Nahda: it placed more emphasis than its predecessors on the individual than the community, exploited the opportunities of market liberalisation reforms, and promoted, rather unsuccessfully, its embrace of a secular state to Islamists in Cairo and Tunis in 2011 ("Erdoğan offers" 2011). Yet, the development of the AKP has much to do with the particular Turkish political and economic context, not least its aspiration to join Europe. Nor did these apparently significant intellectual adjustments prevent the AKP from turning to authoritarian and clientalist techniques of rule or from seeking to enforce public piety (Lynch 2015). The AKP is no longer the aspirational model it once seemed, particularly after the July 2016 coup attempt. The intellectual development of the Islamist project is not a guarantee against authoritarian retrenchment.

Elsewhere, Islamist movements have created political parties in order to make cautious use of new opportunities, but then often found their new creations shaped

unexpectedly by the changing political environment. In Jordan, when a new political parties law was introduced in September 1992, the Muslim Brotherhood chose to create a new body, the Islamic Action Front, to compete in future elections. The Brotherhood would remain a charitable social organisation, working on education, healthcare, and the spread of Islamic values, which allowed it protection should the political opening have proven temporary. Over time the IAF turned away from demands for the introduction of the shariʿa towards calls for constitutional and political reform and developed a more reformist character than the original movement (Wickham 2013, 206). The party still represented a significant political challenge to the monarchy, particularly over normalisation with Israel, and soon made inroads into professional associations too (Robins 2004, 189). In Morocco, the Islamist movement Reform and Renewal (Harakat al-Islah wa-l-Tajdid) entered the political process in 1996 by taking over another political party to create the new Party of Justice and Development. The PJD was cautious in entering the political process and reluctant to criticise the Moroccan monarchy, capturing this delicate balance with the telling phrase: 'We are the opposition *of* His Majesty, not the opposition *to* His Majesty' (Willis 1999, 76-7). Like al-Nahda, it too described itself as 'a party with an Islamic reference', while in contrast the movement continued to press for the application of the shariʿa (Zemni 2013, 134,145). Much like al-Nahda, Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood retained its political and preaching projects intertwined within one organisation until after the 2011 uprisings. With the fall of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, the Brotherhood quickly established the Freedom and Justice Party, which was presented in terms almost identical to those used by al-Nahda and the PJD, as 'a civil party with an Islamic frame of reference' that would be open to Egyptians of all faiths and fully independent from the movement (Wickham 2013, 174-5). However, the cautious calculations of the pre-2011 period were soon abandoned in an increasingly polarised

political contest. The Brotherhood overreached in office until the political experiment was abruptly halted by military coup in July 2013.

The experiences of Islamist parties in Jordan and Morocco show broad similarities with the post-2011 experience of al-Nahda, though where the Jordanian and Morocco movements set up parties to take advantage of political opportunities, the Tunisians were rather compelled to by the exigencies of competing wings within their movement. All three movements found themselves challenged and moulded by the context of pluralistic politics. While al-Nahda's political discourse was heavily shaped by questions of identity and religion during its first experience in government in 2011-14, the movement realised the dangers this brought in a polarised political field and as its electoral support weakened it focused instead on consensus-building, economic recovery, and facing the challenge of violent extremism. This compromise frustrated many of its members. As Gudrun Krämer argues, Islamist movements can enjoy the appeal of purity and autonomy from party politics, which is often seen as a distasteful contest for power (1994). However, integration into political life eats away at this appeal: 'It cannot but compromise the uncorrupted' (Krämer 1994, 205). Al-Nahda returned to the strategy its leaders had tried during opposition under Ben Ali, when they put reconciliation ahead of the movement's Islamising mission. This was an approach that stood in sharp contrast to the exclusive strategy of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood. Al-Nahda used concessions to forge a less antagonistic relationship with political rivals, a strategy given symbolic resonance by the presence of Ghannouchi at Nidaa Tounes' first party congress in January 2016, and the reciprocal presence of Essebsi at al-Nahda's May 2016 congress.

The relationship between movement and party is rarely static, but changes significantly over time. Thus, though formally independent, the IAF in Jordan was effectively subject to Brotherhood direction at first and many of the independent Islamists

who joined soon resigned complaining of the Brotherhood's dominance of the party (Schwedler 2006, 88). Yet internal decision-making was separate and gradually the IAF grew to be more independent of the movement (Schwedler 2006, 95). Likewise, in Morocco the PJD and its associated movement, now renamed the Movement of Unity and Reform (Harakat al-Tawhid wa-l-Islah), were theoretically distinct, with separate newspapers and separate criteria for membership (the movement laid down moral and religious criteria while the party did not).[71] In the wake of the 2003 Casablanca terrorist attacks a much sharper division between party and movement developed, as both endeavoured to avoid accusations of sympathy with extremism. It was not that the party became autonomous from the movement, but rather, in Avi Spiegel's view, that the movement and its authority 'has slowly dissolved into the party and into a sea of members' individual wishes, there to be constructed as each member sees fit, commensurate with his or her own experiences, orientations, and desires' (2015, 179).

By contrast, the case of Egypt demonstrates how power can shift from the movement to the party and back to the movement in the face of a return to repression. The relationship between the FJP and the Muslim Brotherhood was initially very close: it was the Brotherhood Consultative Council that chose the party's top leadership, including its president Muhammad Morsi, and Brothers were soon told that the FJP was the only political party they could join (Wickham 2013, 177). Over time the weight of energy and activism shifted from the movement towards the political party until the 2013 coup, when the party was formally dissolved by the regime. The long-term effect of repression is uncertain, although the Brotherhood may now come to look more like the diverse social movement it was in the 1970s (Brown 2015, 467). Not surprisingly, this experience has

[71] In contrast, al-Nahda's updated basic law for the party, issued in May 2016, maintained as one of the conditions of membership, 'good behaviour and morals' (*al-sulūk al-ḥasan wa-l-akhlāq al-fāḍila*) (Harakat al-Nahda 2016b).

delivered a cautionary warning for Islamists with political ambitions across the region. As Nathan Brown argues:

> Political Islam is hardly dead, but the movements that lead Islamism into the formal political process are likely to be just a little bit more leery of that path almost everywhere—and perhaps totally shut out of it in Egypt. (2014)

As all Islamist movements realised when creating political parties, the participatory experiment carried risks and if it failed, then the movement could provide a basic reserve of resilience and mobilisation when repression returned.

What is striking about the Jordanian, Moroccan, and Egyptian experiences is just how quickly parties that were set up to respond to new political opportunities soon came to dominate and to dilute the influence of the movement as political ambitions came to the fore. This may signal the future direction for al-Nahda too, and at least initially the weight of power in terms of key appointments appeared to remain firmly within al-Nahda the party. Yet finding the balance between ambitions for politics and preaching is a fraught process, as this study of al-Nahda has demonstrated. The tension between the two trends is ever present, waxing and waning with the changing political context. We should see the creation of political parties by Islamist movements as another act of strategic and intellectual adaptation to changing political circumstances and a desire for legal protection in uncertain times. The subsequent trajectory of these parties depends on lessons drawn from their own experiences, the changing meanings ascribed to activism, the resilience of informal networks, and the unanticipated outcomes of exclusion from and participation in the political process.

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