The post-revolutionary process in the countries of the MENA region witnessed the rise to power of Islamist parties and their public dominion. After a year and a half, a strong reaction came from the opposition camp that felt threatened by their overwhelming power. This conflict is a struggle between two types of middle class that have different visions of the nation-state. Furthermore, the social liberalization process encouraged the rise of a second Islamist bloc, the Salafist. While the scriptural and political Salafists accept the rules of democracy and present themselves on the electoral scene as competitors of the Ikhwaní parties, the Salafist-jihadists remain on an anti-systemic level of confrontation. The example of Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia shows the complexity of the Salafi jihadi movement of the last generation that emerges as the social movement of a disenfranchised youths that failed to be integrated.

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Introduction

The political process in the MENA region known as the Arab Spring (which began with the Tunisian uprising of 2010/11) led to the Islamist parties’ rise to power. This was a logical consequence of the political balance within Arab Spring countries: Islamist parties had for the previous decades been the real alternative to the nationalist blocs that supported the regimes in various countries. It was also the end of a long process of enmity and suspicion between Islamist trends and the West, in which the anti-democratic regimes sought legitimacy with Western powers by invoking a war against Islamism (as part of the fight against terrorism).

The process of democratization in the aftermath of the uprisings seemed to open up the path to an inclusive dynamic system through free elections. However, this process turned out to be more complicated than expected. The main obstacle for those Islamist parties was not coming from the West anymore, nor from authoritarian regimes, but from within their own societies.

Indeed, the post-revolutionary freedom of expression and association became a sort of litmus test for most of the Arab countries in transition, which found themselves face-to-face with their own conflicts and contradictions. In particular, the social bloc represented by the old regimes, allied with the liberal part of society, was profoundly frightened by the disorienting success of the Islamist parties, also due to previous government efforts aimed at portraying them as “foreign” and as existentially dangerous to their societies’ values and security. In this way, the temptation to react to the Islamist challenge with a repressive policy gave the old power bloc the chance to return to the forefront of the scene.

To better understand the implications of this political split, it is necessary to analyse the state-building process. In this framework, the uprisings of 2011 led to reactivation of the old conflicts generated by the thorny question of modernization: the independent state was built up on promises of development and modernity. This issue was at the basis of the myth of nationalism, in which the new middle class that gained the power in the aftermath of the anti-colonial struggle ‘invented’ the idea of the nation, based on the tradition of the state-building process of the European nation-state in the 19th century. Like the previous European experience, the

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ideology behind this nationalism was that it would instil emancipating forces of modernity into the people.

The failure of the independent state had brought critics to advance an Islamic alternative to modernity. It was an old dispute that began with the first reformation process in the beginning of the 19th century. The long process of nation-building was not only theoretical but also material: the ideology, whether Islamist or nationalist, hid a class struggle. The struggle of the Muslim Brotherhoods (MB) – the mainstream Islamist trend – was most frequently a struggle for inclusion. Particularly in the last few decades, the MB has focused on the goal of participating in power-sharing. Is today’s struggle for power between nationalists and Islamists in countries like Tunisia, Morocco, Libya, Jordan, Egypt and Syria a struggle between two middle classes hidden behind the question of modernity?

This is certainly the case, as we argue in this paper, to the same extent as the entrance of a new Salafi-jihadi movement is the impulse of the last social strata left behind by the process. The revolutionary process, intended as an Intifada engendering clashes between the rebellious and the security apparatus of the state, gave a strong feeling of empowerment to a new generation of disenfranchised youth. After ‘their revolution’ succeeded, they did not receive any material benefits. Many of them became Salafist-jihadist, with the Tunisian example being the most important.

The spectrum of Islamism has indeed become multifaceted: the liberalization of the political process had given different Islamist trends the chance to develop. Besides the traditional MB parties, different movements, generally classified under the label of Salafism, have also developed. This trend presents three main variations: the political Salafists, the scientific Salafists and the Salafist-Jihadis.

This paper argues that the democratic process should be inclusive and accept the challenge of including both strains of Islamism (mainstream and Salafist), because they represent specific ways that different social strata use to represent themselves on the public scene. Excluding them, and reverting to the old repressive methods, will lead not only to the failure of the democratic process but also to a new season of radicalism and violence.

The MB conservative Islamic parties

Part of the conflict that emerged in the post-revolutionary countries is based on the fact that opposition political parties suspect that MB-affiliated political actors are secretly pursuing a project geared towards Islamizing societies (this prejudice was even stronger in countries like Tunisia in which there was no Islamic public expression in the past). By “Islamizing,” such parties are thought to be engaged in a Machiavellian project of bringing society to accept an Islamic state without declaring it, through charitable associations and Gulf countries’ funding.

This concern is explainable in part because of the presence on the ground of a large Islamist social network composed of charitable and aid associations. If the development of such social Islamic activities was a well-known phenomenon in Egypt and in Jordan since the eighties4, in Tunisia it emerged in a very short time. Two years after the fall of the former regime civil society had completely changed, giving the traditional secular social actors the sense of being completely surrounded and overwhelmed.

The dominant role obtained by Islamist forces after 2011 was achieved both through the ballot boxes and through the general increase of religious signs and identity markers on the public scene: while in Tunisia Nahdha – the Tunisian Islamic party close to the MB - gained 37% of the votes, in Egypt the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) – the political arm of the Muslim Brotherhood – and the Salafist front were together able to get almost 70% of the seats in the new parliament.

The enormous prestige and political influence acquired by Islamist groups, especially the mainstream, were perceived by the opposition liberal camp as a threat. The cases are different in each country – the two extreme cases being the Tunisian one, where the Nahdha party accepted sharing power with two secular parties, and the Syrian, where the ideological conflict took the shape of an armed one5 – but a common analytical approach is possible. Behind the ideological struggle over identity and the myth of the modern state, there was a more material power struggle that overlapped with conflicts between social classes: while in Tunisia, Islamists are

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4 J. HARRIGAN · H. EL-SAID, Economic Liberalisation, Social capital and Islamic Welfare Provision, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, UK.
5 The armed conflict in Syria was the consequence of the demonstrations brutal repression (that took place at the beginning peacefully). Later on, influenced by the general ideological change in the region, the regime succeeded in presenting the Syrian uprising as a war between Islamists and secular.
considered in general as contradicting *tunisianité*\(^6\), in Egypt the MB is accused of having sold the nation to the West and Israel through the bias of Qatar and Turkey\(^7\). It is in reality a struggle within the same middle class split in two, between a more liberal version – the one responsible for building the independent state and monopolizing power since independence\(^8\) – and the more conservative section of the middle class. The latter did not dominate the early nation-building process but instead demanded participation in it, ready to share the national identity-creating myth of nationalism (if it would only be more ‘Islamic’ oriented).

Prevented from penetrating the structure of the state and from sharing political power, Islamists, when allowed, focused on social activism. The result was the creation in the 1980’s of a wide network of Islamic charities operating on an international basis, which presented striking similarities with a broad series of institutions active in the Christian world\(^9\). In Egypt since the eighties and in Tunisia after the revolution, this humanitarian activism became the fiefdom of an Islamist-oriented middle class struggling to occupy public spaces, in the social as much as in the political arena. In Tunisia, for example, the non-regime-backed associative system prior to the revolution was largely based on associations that responded to a specific liberal middle class need, generally Western oriented\(^10\). The emergence of a network of associations inspired by religious values and based on their own sources of financing – outside the Western financial institutions – provides a sense of participation for a ‘new’ middle class, more conservative in social values, but as strong as the traditional liberal middle class that had until then monopolized the public space.

This conservative section of the middle class is the social base of the traditional Islamist movement: as long as the process of inclusion/exclusion evolves, it tries to conquer space. The entry on the scene of this *nouvelle bourgeoisie* – with its own connexions, value-system and financial support – had further implications, in

\(^6\) The Bourguibian myth of a supposed national specificity.

\(^7\) A Panarabist myth is polished off. The memory of Nasser is evoked not only to remind Egyptians of their special mission between the Arab nations, but also to recall the confrontation between the latter and the MB in the 1950s.

\(^8\) They have done it with a sincere spirit of devotion, considering that the general good for the nation and the people was only conceivable within the traditional modernist framework.

\(^9\) As in the Christian world, the kind of activity varies from a fairly specifically missionary type to a more complex system of aid to development.

\(^10\) Mostly focused on women’s empowerment and human rights. There were some exceptions although after 2005.
pushing mainstream Islamists into a moderating process on two levels: practical, because they have adapted their strategy to the reality of the conflict with the state; and theoretical, through the adaptation of the mythical umma concept of Islamic community into the modern concept of the nation-state. Democracy was finally integrated into their political vision and considered a proper Islamic institution.

Salafists and the latest generation of Islamism

The Islamist scene of the post-Arab Spring countries is not limited to the MB’s Islamic parties. There are a variety of other movements that can be included in the category of Salafism. While this denomination has become a general label for extremism (it is generally considered as the MB’s ‘right wing’), Salafism is also a general expression that each Muslim can comfortably attribute to himself with a sense of pride, because it means the imitation of the Salaf (the first three generations of Muslims), considered the ones that best understood and practiced Islam.

In theology, Salafism is considered a manhaj, a methodology that implies the understanding of religion through direct reference to the original sources (Quran and Sunna), as they were understood by the Muslims of the first generations. Today it is often confused with Wahhabism because contemporary Salafists use most of Wahhabi sources (from Ibn Wahhab to Ibn Athimin). Academics, however, tend to differentiate between three main trends under the same Salafist label: Scientific (Scriptural), Political, and Jihadi.

While the three different typologies of Salafism have the same puritan approach toward moral issues (such as sex segregation and women’s role in society) and the strict application of sharia, they differ on the crucial question of wali al amr, the legitimate ruler. The Scientific trend believes that the believer should maintain an apolitical attitude while the Political and Jihadi Salafists agree that a political stand must be taken against an unjust governing

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11The Islamic movement of wasatiyya (moderation) interpreted this new trend, and Youssef al-Qaradawi, speaking from the Al-Jazeera studios in Doha, became its most prominent spokesman.

12This methodological approach of going back to the sources may be considered a way of ijtihad (the interpretation of the text) as well as of purifying religion of innovations (bid’ah). In the first case there is a liberal understanding and the aim is the renewal of religion; in the second case a conservative one, because the aim is conservation of the ‘original religion’.

power (that does not respect the true religion). The Jihadi trend makes no compromises with the system and puts itself in a ‘revolutionary’ position. The Political, on the contrary, can be defined as reformists, in the sense that they maintain the same vision of the Islamic state, but look at it as an objective to be gradually achieved through peaceful political tools. These different political trends tend to reflect the sociology of the constituency they refer to: while jihadis are mostly young (or very young) and belong to a lumpen-proletariat that feels marginalized, the political Salafists have a social base more similar to the MB’s, basically relying on a conservative section of the middle class.\(^{14}\)

The diversity of the Salafi movement, its proximity to a broad array of extremist groups and its complex relations with the MB trend have all significantly contributed to casting a shadow over the movement, which is still considered a significant potential threat by non-Islamist parties and in some international circles. While in Egypt the ‘militarisation’ of the political transition has now painted the MB as standing on the side of the ‘terrorists’ – though any such link to terrorism has yet to be fully demonstrated – the Nahdha party in Tunisia has declared Ansar al-Sharia (AST), the main Tunisian Salafist-jihadi group, a terrorist organization.

The political Salafists are playing an important role and may become even more important in the near future: they are indeed ready to exploit the ‘failure’ of the MB in their experience with power. In Egypt this strategy is made very clear by the politically anomalous alliance of the Salafist Front, headed by the Nour party, with liberals and the military against the MB. In Tunisia, there is a different situation: while the political Salafist spectrum is still not well-structured, Salafists could soon play a role similar to their Egyptian cousins, ready to exploit the discontent of the Islamic public with Nahdha’s government.

The Tunisian Salafist case is particular, though, because the main actor on the scene is not a political Salafist but a jihadi. A new type of jihadism was born that could adapt to the democratic scenario and that regards Tunisia as a specific case in which to apply a different sort of jihadi action, based on dawa (proselytization) instead of qital (fighting).\(^{15}\)

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\(^{14}\) The difference is in the degree of acceptance of democracy and flexibility on moral principles (the latter being ultraconservative on moral issues).

\(^{15}\) They are not linked to al-Qaeda organizations but they apply all the classical symbols and references of the International Jihadi movement.

\(^{16}\) Jihad is indeed one of the most discussed topics in Islamic doctrine. The most
The Tunisian Salafi-jihadi movement is clearly rooted in the lower-class neighbourhoods17 and appears to be the social instrument of expression for the disenfranchised social class that was excluded from participation in the material benefits of the post-revolutionary process.

The Tunisian Salafi-jihadi experience has been evolving in terms of institutionalization, with AST in the forefront, organizing young people into a structured group with a program and an annual conference not unlike that of a political party. Many suspicions as well as fears regarding an empowered jihadi movement in the country, however, have created a political and social environment that allows the repressive apparatus of the state to return in full force.

Ansar al Sharia's example in Tunisia has been imitated in Libya, Egypt and Morocco. Discussions about the Tunisian experience have been held in the most important jihadi forums online and the main leaders of the traditional jihadi movement have intervened to encourage it.

**Conclusion**

The process of democratization that started with the uprisings of 2011 is nothing but the last step of a long process of state-building. This process, in order to be successful, needs to be inclusive and to respect the pluralistic representations that each society expresses.

The development of the Islamist movement must be read as part of a long process of social inclusion. Since its birth in Egypt at the beginning of the 20th century, the MB's political family became the natural conceptual framework in which the demands of a conservative middle class were better represented (the experience of charitable associations being part of it). The democratic process was their chance to be included into the process of power-sharing.

The liberation of the public space that occurred as a consequence of the fall of dictatorship was also the moment in which the societies involved in the process expressed their own contradictions. Islamism continues to be the main preoccupation of the liberal elite, but

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17 Even though we don't have clear statistical data, I take this element from personal fieldwork. Specialists of Ansar al-Sharia like A. Zelin seem to confirm this impression, according to Laura Thompson in her Master thesis "Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia. Competing Outside Party Politics", 2013.
it continues also to be the best way that different social groups find to express their public existence.

Today, it is principally the Salafist movements that remain a deeply problematic issue: Salafists represent either a conservative social class (more reluctant to accept democracy) attached to a fundamentalist version of Islam, or a lower class of disenfranchised people that live in the suburbs of the big cities. In the first case, they are ultra-puritan in the application of moral values but do not threaten the state; in the second case, the radicalism of their position in society is well interpreted by the jihadi trend.

This disenfranchised generation was the one expelled from the myth of the middle class at the time of the old regimes; it expressed its radicalism in an ideological way different from Ikhwan. The transitional process was not able to include them and many became jihadis because it was the only path understandable to them; after revolution they continued their mobilization in a way that has been described as street politics\(^\text{18}\). In Egypt, as in Tunisia and Libya, the main type of street participation has been jihadism\(^\text{19}\).

It is a new generation but an old social class that needs to be included. Whether or not this participation in such extremism could become dangerous and violent remains to be seen, although it is a possibility. For a while (before being banned) AST represented an interesting case in which jihadism, acting in an open social space, would gradually be included in an institutionalized path: this is what was considered the Tunisian laboratory\(^\text{20}\). Even though their agenda is radical, they should be accepted if they refuse the use of violence and show the will to be integrated into society. The temptation to go back to the repressive policy is only an escape from the responsibilities of democracy.


\(^{19}\) Different kinds of social expressions indeed exist. The most important are the art movements (like break dance and hip-hop) or the Ultras supporters groups. The author saw during his fieldwork that the same kind of youth was involved. We point out in this analysis solely the jihadi movement because it is the more structured one and because of the focus of the paper.

\(^{20}\) Ansar al-Sharia in Libya, for example, and in a different range Ansar in Egypt and Morocco, were trying to follow the same model expressed by AST.