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3 Shaping Contention as a Salafi Movement

The Rise and Fall of Ansar al-Sharia in Post-Revolutionary Tunisia

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Abstract
The rise and fall of Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia (AST) in the aftermath of the 2011 Tunisian uprising is indicative of the opportunities and pitfalls of institutionalization of revolutionary movements in situations of democratic transitions in the Middle East and North Africa. AST’s failure to become a leading player of the Tunisian political transition is a direct consequence of its strategic confrontation with other Islamist and secularized players seeking to impose a new identity on the Tunisian state and society. On closer inspection, the origins of this confrontation can be traced to the intestine struggles within AST, between different ideological trends, and between the leadership and the base to define the identity and practices of the movement.

Keywords: Tunisia, mobilization, democratic transition, Salafism, repertoire, contention, identity

The Tunisian revolution started the 2011 Arab uprisings and brought to light key aspects of regime change in the region. Regime change in Tunisia also revealed the complexities of social activism in the country that were previously quashed by a police state. In particular, a highly visible aspect of grassroots activism after 2011 was Salafi religious, social and political mobilization. This raised the question of how a movement with no previous history as a mass-based organization could became a
serious challenger for both state institutions and established social movements – how new individual and collective identities could crystallize into a powerful religious activism, that would then break down after a couple of years.

During the Tunisian democratic transition, the activism of previously co-opted and repressed social and political players, such as the Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT) and the Islamists of the Ennahda movement, molded the reinstitutionalization process (Beinin 2016; Filiu 2015). Yet the uprisings and transition episodes also enabled many new players to enter the arena of contentious politics and make their mark. For “old” players, the fall of the regime provided an opportunity to reengage with the state and to redraw the formal boundaries of the arena of political contention. The wider arena of social contention opened up by the contingent process of a leaderless uprising was itself also crucial in reforming “old” players’ identities and practices, as well as in shaping those of “new” players who did not have much of a voice before. The rise and fall of the Salafi movement Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia (AST) between 2011 and 2013 illustrates well some of the complex interactions between arenas and players, as well as between players themselves in a context of rapid institutional changes.

What we can view as a unitary player from one perspective, we can alternatively portray as an arena of contestation where constituent members fight for the direction and identity of their movement. In the following, Ansar al-Sharia is analyzed first as a player competing against other social and political players to shape arenas of contention and of governance in post-uprising Tunisia, and second as an arena of contention over the meaning and practice of Tunisian Salafism. I challenge the assumption that there is a predefined (Islamist) constituency in the polity simply waiting to be mobilized by specific (Islamist) players. Different social and political players became AST through diverse and contingent processes of mobilization. In its turn, the formulation of the AST political project itself was shaped by the (difficult) integration of diverse constituencies of activists.

AST’s formative period was marked by “transformative events” (Sewell 1996), which reshape the form and content of arenas of contention, from the local to the national. Nationally, they enabled the activities of previously excluded Salafi players. These institutional changes – particularly breakdowns – facilitated new logics of situation and action (Dobry 2009) over established behavioral routines. The coming together of AST and its eventual downfall were in large part attributable to the strategic interactions between Salafi political entrepreneurs and Salafi grassroots sympathizers,
and between these Salafi players and other Tunisian social and political players. Yet the identity of the movement and of its members, as well as its ideological and political orientation, remained contentious throughout the transitional period.

The recognizable Salafi ideological repertoire put forward by AST’s emerging national leaders coevolved with the more idiosyncratic, emotional, and immanent appropriations and interpretations of Islamist themes and practices by self-made grassroots Salafi players who constructed their religious orientations mainly during the transition. The activism of AST players combined practices derived from preexisting Salafi and/or national repertoires of contention with newer practices derived more directly from the arenas of contention produced by the uprisings and state deinstitutionalization. In their turn, the interactions between new and old players and the new democratizing Tunisian state, as well as the interactions between the players themselves, slowly reshaped a new, post-revolutionary arena of contention structured by democratic institutions.

Arenas of contention are the physical and material sites where players can shape and consolidate their identity and practices via the strategic interactions that link them to their arena and to other players (Jasper 2011). Ansar al-Sharia represented such a tentative consolidation of new identities and contentious practices during an episode of deinstitutionalization and reinstitutionalization of the Tunisian state. This process and its outcomes were not “predefined” by Salafi discourses and practices, and their (in)compatibility with democratic institutions. Instead, the interactions between the grassroots sympathizers inspired by a “revolutionary” praxis and the Salafi elites make it difficult for the cadres of the movement to impose a political discipline. In its turn, this set of interactions increased over time the level of the strategic confrontations between AST and other players of the Tunisian democratic transition.

The strategic confrontation between pro-state players seeking to entrench the formal arena of contention of a liberal democratic political order and AST players challenging these state-imposed boundaries eventually led to the collapse of AST as a unitary player. The consolidation of the institutions of the state enabled state players to exclude AST from the formal arena of political contention by declaring it an illegitimate and illegal player (i.e., a terrorist organization in this case). Unable to sustain a high enough level of popular mobilization in the face of an increasing level of state repressive practices, AST dissolved back into a multiplicity of Salafi identities and players.
Islamist Players and Contention in Tunisia before the Arab Uprisings

The defining features of social and political (de)mobilization in Tunisia under authoritarian rule were the limited arenas of contention that were left open to Islamist and non-Islamist opposition players, who in turn developed specific repertoires of contention in response to repression. The anticolonial movement that had become the leading political force in Tunisia at the time of independence, the Neo-Destour Party of Habib Bourguiba, advocated a secularized nationalist discourse as the foundation of the postcolonial state. While Islamic-minded players had contributed to the construction of a Tunisian national identity shaped by Islamic culture, they had not coalesced into a structured political force at the time. For most of the 1960s and 1970s the main political debates and tensions in the country revolved around the opposition between leftist and liberal political players. The repeated changes of political orientation of the Bourguiba regime (toward the left in the early 1960s and then back toward the right in the early 1970s) were accompanied by a steady increase in authoritarian political practices. The violent confrontation between the UGTT and the regime in late 1978-early 1979 resulted in nationwide riots which required the intervention of the army (Beinin 2016). Although ultimately unsuccessful, this protest event would induce the regime to initiate a (short) period of political liberalization in the early 1980s that widened the scope for contentious politics. During this period of authoritarian relaxation Islamists emerged as recognizable political players.

The Movement of Islamic Tendency (MIT), which would later become Ennahda, was formally launched in 1981 with the objective of obtaining legal recognition as a political party. Islamist mobilization inspired by the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood had been growing in the country in the 1970s, mainly via dawa (proselytizing) networks advocating a cultural revival of Islamic teaching and practices (Burgat 1993). Increasingly popular among both a conservative public and religiously minded youth, the movement cofounded by Rashid Ghannushi sought to use the new liberalizing rhetoric of the regime to gain public recognition and avoid open repression. Unsettled by the emergence of a new opposition player whose religious identity ran counter to the secularizing identity of the state, the Bourguiba regime refused to legalize the MIT and jailed its principal leaders. They would remain in jail until the nationwide “food riots” of 1984, which forced the regime into another short period of political liberalization that included an amnesty for all political prisoners.
In the mid-80s, increasingly repressive practices by the state expanded the strategic confrontations between Islamist players and the regime (Allani 2009). As interactions became more violent, the identities and preferences of both sets of players began to change. In 1987, the Tunisian authorities charged that some members of the MIT had been planning an armed insurrection against the regime, and the death penalty was pronounced against Islamist players. The ruling elites' strategic use of violence against the Islamists not only reshaped the interaction between Islamist and state players and threatened the internal cohesion of the MIT, but it also weakened the grip of an ageing president Bourguiba over the regime. At the end of 1987 Bourguiba's new prime minister (and former interior minister), Ben Ali, deposed the president in a palace coup. As Ben Ali sought to consolidate his authority within state institutions, he endeavored to contain external challenges to his legitimacy as president by proposing a new period of political liberalization.

The leadership of the MIT, now renamed Ennahda, reaffirmed its reformist, nonviolent political identity in the early days of the Ben Ali regime as leniency from the ruling institutions facilitated a modest redrawing of the formal arenas of political contestation (Tamimi 2001). Although the movement was not at the time a legally recognized political organization, it was able to present its members as independents candidates to the 1989 parliamentary elections. Ennahda-affiliated candidates obtained about 15 percent of the vote according to the official results and about 30 percent, according to independent observers (Dunn 1996; Daoud 1991). These relative gains made by Tunisian Islamist players, and the dominance of Islamist players in the democratic transition taking place at that time in neighboring Algeria, encouraged the Ben Ali regime to roll back its democratic reforms in order to retain political control. In the months and years that followed the elections, state repression targeting Ennahda increased and most of its leaders once again were either jailed by the regime or, like Ghannushi, forced into exile. Significantly, this transformation of the domestic arenas of contention did not break down the reformist identity and electoralist strategy that the leadership of the party had articulated during the political opening.

In response to Algeria's civil conflict, which from 1992 onward pitted a military-backed regime against armed Islamist guerrilla groups, the Tunisian regime increased its repression of all Islamist players. The hardening of the Ben Ali regime shrunk the political arenas for all social and political players, regardless of their ideological orientation (Camau and Geisser 2003). At the turn of the century, the identity of the Tunisian regime turned on its
repression of and ideological opposition to Islamist players, as reaffirmed through the new security discourse and policies of the “War on Terror” that permeated the international arena after the 9/11 Al-Qaeda attacks in the United States. With social and political contestation severely limited by the security policies of the state in the 2000s, Islamic-minded players explored two main strategies of activism.

First, there was growing interest in Salafi-jihadism, even though for the most part the players attracted to this identity did not translate this ideational involvement into concrete actions. Salafi-jihadi players with links to transnational networks such as Al-Qaeda and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) occasionally mounted operations in Tunisia, such as the 2002 bombing of the Djerba Synagogue. Nonetheless, they were unable to significantly modify the repertoire of contention of Islamism in Tunisia which, by choice or by default, remained predominantly nonviolent. The 2007 dismantling by Tunisian security forces of the “group of Soliman” – named for the location of their only and final showdown with the police – showed the limited outreach of Salafi-jihadi discourse and networks in the country at the time (Wolf 2013). Second, as an alternative to violent contention, the main form of activism during the 2000s was a “scientific” type of Salafism that concentrates on the Islamization of the individual and articulates itself on friends and family networks. While this ultra-conservative Islamic identity influenced by Wahhabism had been present in the country since the 1970s, it made ground in the 2000s due to the weakness of other Islamist players (such as Ennahda) and a particularly constrained arena of contention which only left room for microsocial activism (International Crisis Group 2013b; Merone and Cavatorta 2012).

Prior to the 2011 Arab uprisings, Islamist networks of all orientations were not organized at the national level due to intense police surveillance. With no political activities tolerated, and the mosques under tight police control, activists could only articulate dissenting cultural and religious views within small local circles, which were also mostly disconnected from the global Islamist discourse due to heavy state control over the media and internet. Hence, Islamists were not able to evaluate the influence and appeal of their views in Tunisian society shaped by secularized state policies, nor were they able to fully appreciate the specificities and strength of the different approaches to Islamization in the larger Islamic public sphere.
Social Mobilization and Islamization in the Wake of the Tunisian Uprising

In the immediate aftermath of the Tunisian uprising (2011-2012), the syner-
gies and tensions between Salafi political entrepreneurs and rank-and-file Salafi sympathizers shaped the identity of Ansar al-Sharia in a context characterized by fluid boundaries between arenas of contestation and weak state institutional order. Islamist and Salafi players were not spearheading the street protests that slowly gained momentum in December 2010 after the self-immolation of Mohammed Bouazizi in the provincial town of Sidi Bouzid. Groups and individuals participated in an ad hoc fashion in protest events for a multiplicity of reasons, usually at first in relation to specific local dilemmas and dynamics (Allal 2011). Even as these protests snowballed into a nationwide uprising by the turn of the year, this “leaderless/leaderfull” movement was not at the time orchestrated by one or a few structured national social and political players. The leaderless character of the protests at the time is probably best described as a case of a multiplicity of local leaders (hence leader-full) who were not part of an overarching organization. Localized protest dynamics reflected the mobilization of multiple players trying to obtain different concessions from local and national authorities, as well as acts of revenge, self-promotion, economic opportunism, and so on (Volpi 2017). Across the board, the anti-regime rhetoric and practices were not particularly colored by Islamic identity markers.

As the uprisings gained further momentum in the first half of January 2011, some of the better-structured (and previously co-opted) opposition forces in the country, such as the UGTT, began articulating more programmatic and strategically the demands of the protestors (Beinin 2016). The UGTT’s call for a national strike initially launched in Sfax on January 12 provided a useful framework for the anti-regime protests. Ben Ali’s departure on January 14, 2011 deepened the process of deinstitutionalization of the state and reconfigured the national arena of contention. Pressure from the street and from opposition players led the transitional government to implement swiftly a general amnesty of political prisoners and to set up simple administrative processes to legalize political organizations. At this juncture, Islamists players made a noticeable return to the arenas of contentious politics. They not only reentered national politics, but also competed locally against other social movements to gain influence in the local councils, as well as sought to gain control of the religious institutions previously controlled by the state (Volpi, Merone, and Loschi 2016).
In the spring of 2011 Islamist networks of all orientations scrambled to organize themselves and to obtain legal recognition in Tunisia. The Ennahda party was legalized on March 1, 2011. The Hizb ut-Tahir movement also attempted to become a political party, but was turned down the first time around – it would become officially recognized the following year. The Ansar al-Sharia movement was formally launched in late April 2011, but it did not seek legal recognition as a political party. New Tunisian Salafi associations and parties also emerged progressively over the months, including Jabhat al Islah, which became a political party in 2012, Hizb al-Asala, and Hizb Arrahma. The formal establishment of parties and associations was a direct consequence of the changing institutional order in the Tunisian polity and the redrawing of the boundaries of the arenas of formal political contention. Beyond formal institutional changes, however, complex mobilization processes empowered these organizations in different ways as a result of new strategic interactions between new and old players (Donker 2013).

The AST organization launched by Abou Ayadh was in April 2011 mainly an empty shell structured around a small network of older Salafis who had participated in international armed jihadism and spent time in Tunisian jails. Its main public presence was online, in the social media, notably through the al-Qairawan Media Foundation, with postings on blogs, a Facebook pages, etc. (Branson 2014). Through these outlets, the leaders and cadres of the new organization advocated a mixture of common Salafi themes and Tunisian-framed interpretations (notably the views of Al-Idrissi, even though he never joined AST). These Salafi players sought a national audience and local supporters in order to compete with other Islamist and other non-Islamist players in a liberalized public sphere.

Grassroots support for Ansar al-Sharia grew throughout 2011 and 2012 in the context of a reconfiguration of the local arenas of contention within the formal and informal religious space. Until the uprising, the regime had tightly controlled the mosques, and imams had to deliver sermons preapproved and in some case provided by the Interior ministry. As the repressive apparatus of the regime fell apart at the beginning of 2011, groups of mosque-goers took it upon themselves to evict the official imams from their local mosques and to replace them by local religious players. While some of the new imams were old Islamist opponents of the regime previously associated with Ennahda or Islamic scholars not involved in social activism, in many poor urban neighborhoods these new religious “authorities” were young activists who gained recognition in the weeks that followed the uprising (Merone 2016). These self-made Imams and their associates were able to establish themselves because they were commonly the first ones to
take action against state-appointed religious personnel in their neighborhood. Once in place, they sought to legitimize their presence by linking up with more structured and higher profile Islamist players (interview, Bizerte, November 2015). AST was a main product of this encounter between established Salafi players in search of an audience and local activists in search of guidance and recognition.

For new grassroots Salafi players, the flexibility of the AST discourse and the autonomy given to local activists gave AST a competitive advantage over stricter Islamist organizations like Hizb ut-Tahir (interview with a former AST sympathizer, Medenine, October 2014). In the early days of the transition, the AST brand grew by spontaneous affiliation of local Islamist youth who found in this organization an umbrella structure providing user-friendly ideological resources and theological expertise. At that time, three sets of interactions were particularly important for the success of the movement. First, AST leaders debated among themselves the issue of the primary orientation and identity of AST as a mass-based movement. Second, the interactions between the base and the top of the movement kept reshaping the internal rules and chain of command of the organization. Third and last, the relations between AST groups and other local Salafi groups inspired by AST but not formally part of the movement kept fluctuating as a function of changing political circumstances.

**Permanent Revolution versus Institutionalizing Political Salafism?**

The definition of a distinct Salafi arena of contention as a result of strategic competition between Salafi, Islamist and secularized players characterizes the beginning of the new democratic Tunisian model (2012-2013). Grassroots mobilization turned into a more structured model of militancy that entrenched AST as a recognized, unitary social and political player contesting the dominant narrative of state reinstitutionalization. The efforts made to structure the rapidly expanding movement were visible at AST’s second national congress in Kairouan in May 2012. Over 5,000 local representatives from all over the country met to discuss the general orientations of the movement (Merone and Cavatorta 2012). National leaders sought to formalize the role of the grassroots Salafi players who had joined the movement by including them in centralized national organization. The AST leadership also sought to maintain open channels of communication with the then ruling party, Ennahda, by having some of their cadres of the
Islamist movement at the conference. This drive to make AST a recognized unitary player on the national scene was nonetheless counterbalanced by the centripetal tendencies of Salafi activism (Cavatorta 2015).

One noticeable area of friction within AST as much as between AST and other social and political players concerned the protean repertoire of contentious politics used by grassroots activists, and particularly the use of violence. The Salafis’ emphasis on the Quranic notion of “commanding good and forbidding wrong” (amr bil maruf wa nahi anil munkir) was interpreted and implemented in many different ways by groups in their local context. Retrospectively, Salafi sympathizers often blamed the overzealous and misguided Salafi youths who were too quick to use violence to back up their religious message and gave a poor image of AST and of Salafi players generally (interview with former AST sympathizers, Douar Isher, October 2015). For AST, guilt by association became a growing nuisance in 2012 as other social and political players increasingly identified the movement as a serious competitor (Merone and Cavatorta 2013). The revolutionary mood that until then had supported the idea that everything could be changed in the country became negatively associated with AST; an organization that seemingly challenged all the things that most social and political players then wanted to remain stable. In this context, the negative “radical flank effect” which hindered the movement’s acceptance by the wider public was not compensated by a positive radical flank effect in favor of the institutionalized Islamists of Ennahda.¹

The violent demonstration that took place at the US embassy in Tunis in September 2012 gave another twist to these dynamics of grassroots violence poorly controlled by AST. Although AST and other Islamist organizations had called for a demonstration, its members constituted only a part of the crowd that participated, and the ransacking of the nearby American school was a coincidental event. Alongside AST members and sympathizers in recognizable Salafi attire, came youths sporting shorts and T-shirts from neighboring poor suburbs who engaged in looting once the protest became more violent (Mosaique FM 2012). As the protest went out of control, Tunisian security forces began using live ammunition against protesters in an ad hoc response to the turn of events. Secularized political players used this episode to ask the Ennahda-led government to ban AST and to step up its security response against Salafi activism. In the aftermath of this event, secular opposition actors publicly denounced AST as the main culprit

¹ For typical strategic dilemmas in situations of nonviolent resistance, see Chenoweth and Stephan 2011.
behind the violence, and singled out Abou Ayadh as the man responsible (Mandraud 2012). Chased by the police, the AST founder went underground in Tunisia before crossing over to Libya and associating himself with Ansar al-Sharia in Libya.

At about the same time, the negotiations between Ennahda and the secularized opposition over the role of Sharia in the new Tunisian constitution had marginalized the views proposed by the conservative faction of Ennahda, which were closest to the Salafi viewpoint, and which had lobbied to make Sharia central to the new Tunisian constitution. Despite recognizing the popular appeal of AST at a grassroots level, the Ennahda leadership had decided that reaching a compromise with pro-secular forces was a priority to stabilize the political system. Salafi criticism mounted over the months, as grassroots Salafi players increasingly opposed pro-Ennahda and pro-government players (Marks 2013). AST and other Salafi activists strategically targeted controversial cultural events and initiatives as well as contentious economic activities such as the sale of alcohol in order to position themselves as the defenders of true Islamic identity. These confrontations were underpinned by a growing disappointment with the policies of Ennahda among grassroots Salafis, as well as by a desire to reshape their own social world in a context where the earlier consensus about the identity of the state and of Tunisian society had weakened (interview with former Salafi activists, Douar Hisher, November 2015).

Social and political empowerment was a mobilizing factor particularly for the “revolutionary youth” who were seeking to improve their condition and society through direct action as they did in the heyday of the uprising. Many grassroots activists of all ideological orientations who had become empowered at the beginning of the transitional period through “neighborhood committees,” “revolutionary leagues,” and so on, sought to entrench their position (Allal 2011). As institutionalized politics and governance slowly came back to play a main role in their everyday life, the ad hoc, extra-institutional power of these activists began to decrease significantly. Once in government the Ennahda party in particular was quite effective at co-opting many of these local players into its network of governance (Volpi, Merone, and Loschi 2016). Islamic-minded players unsatisfied with the terms of the new deal proposed by the Ennahda-led government found in the AST an outlet for contesting the new forms of administrative control of society.

A second set of strategic interactions were more directly shaped by the religious identity of AST and its Salafi discourse. The grassroots activists’ newly affirmed views about the position of women in society, the scope of
Sharia in regulating social interactions, etc., clashed with those of other social actors in everyday practices (Cavatorta 2015; Donker 2013). In this context, dissatisfied by the liberal discourse of Ennahda, Salafi players questioned the ability of the party to position Islam centrally in the new state system and to help re-Islamicize society. They used those social spaces that they had continued to build in the aftermath of the uprisings (mosques, poorer neighborhoods) as a springboard to challenge locally the authority of the new democratic government and the legitimacy of the state. Salafi sympathizers, particularly among the unemployed youth, repeatedly underpinned this identity-based discourse with an account of the socioeconomic hardship faced by the population linking socioeconomic failure to a lack of proper Islamic governance (interview with former Salafi activists, Douar Hisher, October 2015).

AST as an Arena of Contention and Post-AST Salafi Trajectories

AST failed to entrench a collective identity derived from revolutionary practices and to turn itself into an institutionalized movement in the face of a reemerging state during the period of democratic normalization of the Tunisian model (2013-2014). Strategic competition among AST players and between them and pro-state players became at this juncture the principal causal factor behind the implosion of the movement. The September 2012 attack against the US embassy had illustrated the difficulties of AST to speak with a single voice. Subsequently, the flight of one of its main leaders accentuated the tendency of AST to function as a multicephalous organization. In addition, frictions among different AST currents increased sharply, alongside the frictions between them and state and secular players, after another act of political violence at the start of the year. On February 6, 2013, Salafi-jihadi players loosely connected to AST assassinated leftist opposition parliamentarian Chokri Belaid. By openly using political assassinations to support their views, these players drew the boundaries of the arena of contestation between AST and other political players, as well as undermined the fragile consensus inside AST. Inside the movement, this assassination exacerbated the ideological and tactical differences between different currents within AST ahead of the third annual conference of the movement. Those Salafi-jihadis advocating armed jihad saw Belaid as an apostate due to his secularist positions, and thus as someone whom it could be legitimate to kill in the circumstances. The (larger) Salafi current following the initial model proposed by Abou Ayadh saw the country as a Muslim
land in which they could wage the jihad by the tongue (proselytism) and so there was no case for waging jihad by the sword (Merone and Cavatorta 2013; International Crisis Group 2013b).

Domestically, the political violence of the armed jihadi players undermined the strategies of the more pragmatic AST players who did not want to engage in a frontal confrontation with the state and secularized social movements. In the aftermath of the assassination, the secularized opposition parties and civil society organizations such as the UGTT which had been criticizing the leniency of the Ennahda-led government toward Salafi players, stepped up their criticism of the lax security policies of the government to woo public opinion. To reaffirm the authority of the state and its own national legitimacy, Ennahda progressively changed its strategic positioning toward AST from a policy of informal accommodation to one of formal confrontation. This change, tentatively enacted through the arrest warrant for Abou Ayadh, took a new dimension in May 2013 when the interior minister banned the third national conference of AST about to take place in Kairouan (Blaise 2013).

As soon as the AST conference was banned, grassroots AST activists and sympathizers battled the police in several suburbs of Tunis and several other towns. At the same time, senior figures of the movement discursively hyped their opposition to the government and the state institutions (Weslaty 2013). The decision of the Tunisian government to be less lenient toward the transgressions of AST pushed further away the possibility of legalization and institutionalization of the movement, as illustrated by the behavior and discourse of the Salafi players at the time. Even retrospectively in the light of the failure of AST, grassroots Salafi sympathizers did not usually estimate that the organization had missed an opportunity by failing to turn itself into a formal political organization. They would argue that it was precisely because it was not a mere political party that AST was attractive to people dissatisfied with the post-authoritarian political system (interview with former AST sympathizers, Douar Hisher, October 2015). At the elite level, the lack of clear consensus regarding the direction of the organization became particularly damaging in July 2013 when armed jihadis assassinated a second leftist parliamentarian, Mohamed Brahmi, and rekindled the political debates about national security and the need for a complete ban on AST activities.

Ultimately, the relationship between AST and the Ennahda-led government fundamentally changed in August 2013. In an effort to reassert the control of the government over security affairs in the face of increased opposition from secularized political players, the interior minister announced
that AST would be classified a terrorist organization. This institutional shift from toleration to repression of AST had several important consequences not only for AST itself but also for Salafi mobilization in the country (Cavatorta 2015). As AST was declared a terrorist entity by the state, its appeal and usefulness as an umbrella organization for Salafi players across the country fell sharply. Until then AST had benefited from the mimetic quality of grassroots Salafi mobilization to position itself as the leading voice of Salafism in Tunisia. Grassroots Salafi players, be they AST members or not, had benefited in their turn from the national and international exposure of AST in their endeavors to “re-Islamicize” their neighborhood. After the ban on AST, as the police increasingly arrested AST leaders and members, many Salafi sympathizers began to take their distance from the organization. Their mimetic relation with AST turned from being a strategic advantage to being a practical liability. As the security policies of the state became more effective over the months, Salafi activism began to decrease tangibly, particularly in those public arenas of contestation where they used to be highly visible (mosques, poorer suburbs, etc.).

Increasingly, state authorities regained control of public spaces that had been shaped by Salafi activists since the uprisings. The police cleared up the public squares where Salafis organized their activities, clamped down on street patrolling by activists, and evicted groups from the mosques which they had appropriated for themselves. In this context, purported association with AST became a ready-made justification for arresting and imprisoning Salafi players. Anwar Aouled, the lawyer heading the families of prisoners’ association Marsad, indicated that the reported increase in police practices inherited from the old regime, such as torturing suspects, was particularly noticeable against alleged Salafis. He noted that particularly after the 2015 terrorist attacks in Tunis (March) and Sousse (June), the justice system was reluctant to oppose the police on issues presented as cases of “terrorism” (interview with Anwar Aouled, Tunis, October 2015). Since 2014, the increased state repression against Salafi players had induced a process of demobilization particularly in the poorer suburbs among the youth. In this more repressive context, grassroots Salafi sympathizers not only took their distance from AST, but also adopted more low-profile activities to avoid attracting the attention of the police. In particular, local players reverted to low-key practices through family and friends’ networks with limited national or transnational connections (interview with Salafi activists, Douar Hisher, November 2015).

State security policies targeting the “terrorist” activities of AST paved the way in 2014 and 2015 for the shrinkage of the arenas of religious contestation
through a stricter state control of the mosque networks. The Ministry of Religious Affairs appointed new state-vetted imams to the mosques that had been controlled by Salafi players after the uprisings as the police progressively evicted Salafi imams. This process began under the technocratic government of Jomaa in 2014 and accelerated under the government of Essebsi in 2015 when former cadres of the old regime reintegrated the ruling circles. The appointment of Othman Battikh, Grand Mufti under Ben Ali, as minister for religious affairs in February 2015 illustrated well this shift in state personnel and practices. In this new and more repressive arena of contestation, Salafi players not directly associated with AST repositioned themselves as legal civil society associations, including workers’ unions as in Sfax, in order to be able to continue some of their activities (interview with Salafi activists, Tunis, October 2015). In this way, they were able to reshape to some extent the arenas of religious contestation and partially to counter the strategic expansion of state players in the religious domain. These new and more legalistic practices of contestation, especially when backed by substantial grassroots support, have proved to be quite effective, as with the pressure of the Sfax mosque network (and union) which contributed to the removal of the minister for religious affairs at the start of 2016 (Larbi 2015).

This new style of activism was evident in Tunis in October 2015 during the well-organized demonstration in front of the Ministry of Religious Affairs by associations from Sfax contesting the replacement of imams in their town. Well-behaved protestors, mostly wearing Western-style clothing, adopted a “sit-in” strategy to block the entrance to the ministry, while the organizers broadcasted their demands and critiques of the minister. After a few hours, the protest ended peacefully, with demonstrators singing the national anthem before disbanding. As participants and organizers were keen to stress during this protest event in Tunis, they were contesting the policies of the government mainly through court actions. Protest events like this sit-in in front of the ministry were designed to attract public attention to those cases where official policies appeared not to be in full compliance of the law – such as the administrative eviction of imams before a judicial ruling is obtained (interview with activists from Sfax, Tunis, October 2015). These more legalistic strategies deployed in the face of the “anti-terrorist” discourses and tactics of the police and the government constituted a noticeable shift from the strategies of ad hoc mobilization and street violence once used by AST and other Salafi groups from 2011 to 2013.² Salafi-leaning

² There were nonetheless more confrontational episodes of street mobilization in the Sfax area in the second half of 2015 pitting the police against and Salafi-leaning players.
organizations have become more formal civil society associations and have engaged more directly with the legal framework devised by the state to structure contestation. These were not strategies that AST was commonly and explicitly endorsing when it was allowed to operate in the country, as its use of “revolutionary” discourse and practice kept putting in question the very legitimacy of the state system.

At the same time as these legalistic approaches developed, an older repertoire of contention also became more central in the aftermath of AST demise. Salafi-jihadi players advocating armed resistance against the state began to be more active in the country, while transnational jihadi networks directed prospective fighters toward external military theaters (Libya, Syria). Okba Ibn Nafaa, the Tunisian subsidiary of the Algerian-led AQIM began to conduct regular guerilla operations against the Tunisian security forces in the Chambi Mountains, near the Algerian border, from the summer of 2013 onwards (International Crisis Group 2013a). Salafi activists located near the Libyan border have also crossed over to join Ansar al-Sharia Libya as the prospects for AST became bleaker in Tunisia (interview with former AST sympathizer, Tataouine, October 2014). Further afield, the jihadi groups operating in the Syrian theater have also witnessed an influx of fighters of Tunisian origin. By turning to these very specific repertoires of contention, many Salafi players strategically dropped the Tunisian-centric approach of AST and reframed their activism within the wider regional arena of contention structured by transnational jihadi networks. The breakdown of a domestic arena of Salafi contention shaped by AST and its advocacy of nonviolent jihad in Tunisia de facto reinforced a Salafi identity little concerned with national boundaries. In this perspective, the strategic deadly violence of (Islamic State-linked) armed jihadis, such as the killings of foreign tourists in Tunis and in Sousse in March and June 2015 became another main alternative to the societal project of AST.

The mobilization of the revolutionary youth that underpinned the growth of AST from 2011 to 2013 did not produce the kind of structured organization that the established Salafi players who had launched the movement had hoped for. The leadership of AST failed to secure the place of the movement after the revolution via more symbolic and politically ritualistic forms of contention expressed through political party activism and voting, as some in the Ennahda movement had hoped for. The electoral scores of Ennahda in the October 2014 parliamentary elections indicated that, among other things, the Salafi youth who had previously mobilized behind AST did not turn to supporting Ennahda once AST was banned. The strategic choice of Ennahda to ban AST in August 2013 so damaged the relationship between
these two Islamic-minded publics that Salafi sympathizers would be loath to consider supporting Ennahda subsequently – even though some admitted that they voted for them in the first parliamentary elections of 2011 (interview with Salafi sympathizers, Douar Hisher, October 2015). In practice, the breakup of AST redirected mobilization in two main directions, as well as generating a demobilization of Salafi players across the board. On the one hand determined activists turned to those older repertoires of violent political contestation advocated by transnational Salafi-jihadi networks, which are designed to cope with authoritarian arenas of contestation. On the other hand, mobilization became less politicized and more legalistic as Salafi-leaning players sought to reframe their goals and identity in order to operate within a public arena of contestation whose rules are defined primarily by state players.

Conclusion

The rise and fall of Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia in the aftermath of the 2011 Tunisian uprising is tightly linked to the quasi-dual nature of this Salafi movement. AST’s eventual failure as a unitary player of the democratizing Tunisian social and political scene is a direct consequence of its strategic confrontation with other Islamist and secularized players seeking to impose a new identity on the Tunisian state and society. The roots of this fateful confrontation however can be traced back to AST itself but this time as an arena of contestation in which Islamist, Salafi, and grassroots players competed between themselves to shape the identity and practices of the movement.

Institutionalist accounts of regime change in Tunisia commonly frame the rise and fall of AST and of Salafi players more generally in a fairly standard explanation of the political opportunity structure. From that angle, it is mainly a case of previously repressed Salafi activists seizing the opportunity created by the collapse of the existing authoritarian system to impose their views and practices in society, until such time as the post-revolutionary state was able to reimpose its own normative and material order. However, while the opening and closing institutional framework was important to explain the rise and decline of the AST, it did not explain its specific forms and dynamics of mobilization.

Post festum it is easy to overlook the grassroots dynamics of mobilization/demobilization and thus to exaggerate the unitary nature of AST. Although the Islamist arena was already complex under authoritarianism, when
the opening came, the ways in which the mobilization happened are not directly explained by the opportunity structures. The structural opening and closing are the context, but they do not explain anything beyond that. In particular they do not directly help us understand what that mobilization and later repression actually means for the Salafi trend. In effect throughout the period of formal existence of AST, grassroots mobilization as Salafi mobilization was contingent, and the relation between Salafi and other players at the national level was always evolving.

The failure of AST to create a critical juncture for the implementation of a Salafi project in Tunisia is a principal outcome of these dynamics of grassroots mobilization, identity construction, and state reinstitutionalization. The forms of mobilization of grassroots players behind AST, be it explicit or via mimetic association, at different junctures of the Tunisian transition illustrated the aspirational nature of the movement and the autonomy of the base. The AST logo often masked microstrategies of social mobility, ad hoc responses to local dynamics, personal rediscoveries of the religious, etc. that curtailed the ability of the leadership to forge a stable identity for the movement and to direct the behaviors of players who have associated themselves (or have been associated) to AST. These dynamics of grassroots mobilization generated self-limiting strategic options for AST as a national player that could institutionalize Salafi practices, ideas and leadership, in the face of the competition generated by state, Islamist and secularized players.

It may well be that today, with the benefit of insight, scholars of the region may voice long-held doubts such as: “Did the Salafists really have a chance in a country like Tunisia?” They may also point to the continuing importance of institutionalized players like the UGTT in social and political life as evidence of longer-term structural trends in the evolution of the Tunisian polity. Once again, the benefit of insight may be deceptive. “Old” players too were challenged by regime change. The continuing political relevance of the UGTT is not a given but the result of internal policy and personnel changes and external repositioning at the time of the revolution to present itself convincingly to the population as a much-needed organization of the post-Ben Ali period. Despite its initial organizational advantage, it too could have become redundant had it not reinvented itself successfully. AST too, despite its initial organizational disadvantage, was able to present itself as a much-needed player of the post-Ben Ali era to a growing number of dissatisfied Tunisians in the early transitional period. It is its internal policing and its external relations failures that thwarted the movement’s effort to remain a relevant organization and that made “Salafism” a failing identity marker of the new Tunisian political system. In both cases, initial
conditions only provided a set of identities and resources with which to work, they did not predetermine the outcome – if they did, Ben Ali would still be sitting in his Carthage palace.

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References


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