

The Sacred as Secular

State Control and Mosques Neutrality in Post-revolutionary Tunisia

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Abstract

How are characteristics of state-religion relations defined? The following article provides a critical response to the competition perspective in studies on secularization, secularism and mobilized religion. It argues that actors differ in how religion and state should relate to public life, not the extent that they should be integral or separate from each other. The article substantiates its argument by exploring how in Tunisia—in a context of revolutionary, social and political instability—a variety of positions were articulated regarding the preferred position of Islam in relation to, first, national identity and, second, state authority. This is done in direct reference to one particular contentious issue: State control over mosques in name of ensuring partisan neutrality of religious spaces in the country. The article builds on multiple fieldwork visits to Tunisia and specifically Sfax, during which 32 individuals were interviewed. In addition the article builds on hundreds of primary and secondary sources.

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Introduction

How are characteristics of state-religion relations defined? The following article provides a critical response to the increasingly mainstream competition perspective in studies on secularization, secularism and mobilized religion. In brief, this perspective states that state-religion relations are a product of a competition between those that wish religion to be ‘separate from all or some aspects of politics or public life’ and those that wish for religion to have a more integral position (Fox 2015, 2). Instead, the article argues that actors differ in how religion and state should relate to public life, not the *extent* that they should be integral or separate from each other. The article substantiates its argument by exploring how in Tunisia—in a context of revolutionary, social and political instability—actors articulated a variety of positions regarding the preferred relation of Islam to, first, national identity and, second, state authority. This is done in direct reference to one particular contentious issue: State control over mosques in name of ensuring partisan neutrality of religious spaces in the country. Specifically, the article focuses on tensions around the dismissal of an activist imam, Ridha Jaouadi, from the largest mosque in Sfax.¹

The article builds on multiple fieldwork visits to Tunisia and specifically Sfax. The visits took place in March 2014, May, November and December 2015 and July 2016. They include interviews with imams, activists, party representatives, advisors to (former) ministers and other stakeholders. In total 32 individuals were interviewed. In addition the article builds on an extensive collection of primary and secondary (Arabic) sources. These include primary documents from state institutions, mosque related organizations and Islamic parties, as well as hundreds of newspaper articles collected through dedicated websites and a general digital archive for Tunisian newspapers.²

The following provides, first, a theoretical critique of the competition perspective in studies on secularization, secularism and religion. This is followed by a brief exploration of the specific case at hand. Subsequently, the article explores various ways in which Islam is positioned in relation to national identity and state authority. The analytical section concludes with a discussion of its theoretical implications on the competition perspective in studies on secularism, secularization and mobilized religion.

¹ Sfax is the second largest city in Tunisia, after the capital Tunis.

² This digital archive can be found at www.turess.com.

The Failure of the Secularization Thesis

The secularization thesis can be described as the idea that due to modernization the importance of religion in public life declined. In one form or another, it is argued that modernization resulted in the increasing influence of rational authority in contemporary society, and/or the diminishing dominance of religion in structuring its ever more professionalized (and functionally differentiated) character. To write that this thesis faces some criticism is an understatement: A whole field of ‘post-secularism’ exists on the grounds that the secularization thesis is falsified in general by the failure of teleological modernization theories and more specifically by the lasting importance of religion in public life (Wilson 1992; Stark 1999). The United States, for instance, has seen enduring levels of public religious adherence, and also in Europe—for instance in Spain, Poland, and Ireland—religion retains a public importance (Anderson 2003; Itçaina 2011). More importantly for our subject matter, in most Muslim majority countries religion also proved much more resilient than some anticipated. Increasingly scholars use a critique of the secularization thesis as a starting point for studies on mobilized religion and secularism (Stark 1999).

In this context, the view that religion and secular forces are each other's direct opposites remains popular in public and academic debates. An example of this position is Jonathan Fox's *Political Secularism, Religion, and the State* (2015).³ In it, Fox provides a quantitative empirical exploration of state policies versus religion in the world; showing an overall increasing involvement of the state in religious affairs. He relates this observation directly to a refutation of the secularization thesis: ‘removing the prediction of religion’s inevitable demise or decline essentially amputates secularization theory’s heart and soul’ (2015, 17). As an alternative to the secularization thesis he proposes a ‘competition perspective’: the view that (changing) state policies toward religion are an outcome of a competition between secular and religious forces (2015, 8). From the focus on state policies and competition it follows that to explain the changing relation between state and religion, the central explanatory factor should be a political ideology. For Jonathan Fox this is political secularism. As he states, political secularism is ‘an ideology or set of beliefs advocating that religion ought to be separate from all or some aspects of politics or public life (or both)’ (2015, 2). It is this ideology that is ‘*competing with religion* over this aspect of the public agenda’ (2015, 2, Italics by the author).

Fox is one of the more prolific authors of this approach. Another example is Ahmed Kuru (2009) who also argues that state policies toward religion are an outcome of ideological struggles. But, in contrast

³ It is the latest publication to come out of a larger project, surveying differences in separation between religion and state across the globe (Fox 2006, 2008, 2013).

to Jonathan Fox, he explores how state-religion relations are shaped by the competition between two forms of secularism—passive and assertive—in France, Turkey and USA (Kuru 2009, chap. 1). It is the dynamic nature of these ideological struggles, and their historical development, that results in the variety of state policies toward religion in these three cases. Fox and Kuru are two typical examples of a competition perspective in political science, but among many other scholars this approach can be discerned (e.g. Marty and Appleby 1991; Davie 1994; Norris and Inglehart 2011).

There are a number of issues with this approach. First, by viewing state-religion relations as an outcome of a competition between political secularism and religion, a complex social process is reduced to a single ideological opposition. Consider as contrast Agrama (2010) who argues that state-religion relations are not defined by an outcome of an ideological competition as such, but rather by continuous tensions that emerge around the *question* ‘of where to draw a line between religion and politics’ (Agrama 2010, 500). Using Egypt as case study, he argues that the emergence of the modern state blurred boundaries between what is secular and religious in public life. This is for instance the case around the question what the role is of civil courts in interpreting religious law when judging on marriage related cases. These ‘boundary questions’ gained salience in Egyptian public debates and inadvertently provided power to the Egyptian state as it turned the state into the sovereign arbiter of these disputes. The argument implies that state-religion relations are not an outcome of a competition over setting institutional policies as such, but rather an outcome of a continuous process in which actors navigate and define boundaries—and thereby relations—between state and religion in public life.⁴

Second, the question of ‘drawing the boundary’ between religion and politics does not stand on its own. How actors articulate this boundary closely relates to other social boundaries in public life. Eickelman and Piscatori (2004), for example, argue that the role of religious and state authority in the production of public norms is closely related to boundaries between what is seen to be public or private (see also Casanova 1994, chap. 2). These debates—for instance the boundary between household and public life—define areas of legitimate state intervention. These issues emerge around questions regarding, for example, the relation between religion and the public ideal of motherhood, and where and how children should learn about religion. These debates are as much about what is seen to be private and the role of the state in shaping public life, as they are about religion. Needless to say, these are highly gendered issues (Eickelman and Piscatori 2004, chap. 4). In short, the articulation of state-religion relations cannot be seen in isolation from other conflicts and social boundaries in public life.

⁴ Bowen (2010) also raises the issue of secularism and the relation between state and religion in public life—although in a more epistemological context.

Third, by reducing these activities to a one dimensional conflict between political secularism and religion, the competition perspective underestimates the level of agency actors derive from the multifaceted nature of these conflicts. As Jenny White (2014) argues in her discussion of contemporary Turkish nationalism that ‘today it is not so much Islam that has challenged the [kemalist] status quo, but rather what Islam has become in the postcoup urban, modern, globalized environment.’ She continues to state that in this context ‘for many, religious and national identities, like commodities, have become objects of choice and forms of personal expression’ (White 2014, 4). In such a context, conflicts are not simply constituted by a competition between secular and religious forces. Rather they are constituted by individuals navigating and defining boundaries between what is sacred and secular, public and private, religious and Turkish nationalism, as they attempt to shape public life (White 2014, 5). It is these strategies of navigation and definition that both reflect and shape state-religion relations.

The authors above argue that the conflicts that shape state-religion relations, first, reflect a continuous process in which actors navigate and define boundaries; second, are related to other social boundaries and; third, are shaped by individual agency. Collectively, they argue for the multifaceted character of conflicts regarding the articulation of state-religion relations. These are just a few examples. Many other authors make similar arguments: in relation to economic change (Tripp 2006; Tuğal 2009), the emergence of social networks (Singerman 2004; Clark 2004), the constitution of tribal identities (Longva 2000) and in relation to the development of religious legal authority (Hefner and Zaman 2007). These examples refer to Muslim majority countries, but many scholars make similar claims in reference to other faiths and regions.⁵ Each in their own way, these scholars show that state-religion relations are not the result of a one dimensional competition between religion and political secularisms. Rather, they show that these are the result of multifaceted conflicts through which actors navigate and redefine relations between religion and state in public life. As such, to understand how state-religion relations come about, it is not enough to explore the outcome of an ideological competition. We have to explore claims and actions of actors as they participate in these conflicts. In the end, it is these claims and actions that condition the range of possible outcomes for state-religion relations (for related approaches, see Bennani-Chraïbi and Fillieule 2003; Qasim Zaman 2009; Barras 2014).

⁵ See as an example the various edited volumes on religion in contemporary societies (Gorski et al. 2012; Mapril et al. 2017).

The above implies that the most relevant object of study to explore these issues are contentious events related to state-religion relations. Following the issues highlighted by Eickelman and Piscatory (2004) and White (2014) respectively, this article focuses on two specific questions to explore how actors navigate these conflicts and relate religion and state to public life. First, how does religion relate to *state authority*? And, second, how does religion relate to *national identity*? The present study adds to the above by providing an accessible critique to the competition perspective in studies on secularization, secularism and mobilized religion. Second, it adds to these studies an explicit exploration of the practical claims and actions of actors involved in these conflicts. It provides an example of how the multifaceted character of these conflict and the contingent actions of actors conditions the ways in which state-religion relations take shape.

The Tunisian Revolution and Mobilized Islam

As narrated in detail in other articles (Chomiak 2011; Angrist 2013) the 2011 revolution led to a sudden political liberalization and weakening of state control over Tunisian society. One of the most striking outcomes of these developments was the resurgence of religion in public life. The strength of the Ennahda party was one of the main examples in this respect; leading to a contentious debate on the importance and characteristics of its Islamic identity (Donker 2013). Another example was the emergence of movements such as the Salafist-Jihadist Ansar Charia and the caliphate focused Hizb al-Tahrir (Marks 2013). Finally, public debates regarding religion in public life became increasingly linked to terrorism, especially following the two attacks on tourist destinations in 2015 and a lingering Jihadist presence along the Algerian and Libyan borders.

Beyond these headline grabbing developments, a more fundamental question emerged during this period over the position of religion in Tunisian public life. A public life that for many had been defined by the effects of a strong political secularism over decades of authoritarian rule (Zeghal 2013; Donker and Netterstrøm 2017). This question reflected in a range of contentious topics that emerged throughout the first five years following the revolution: a few examples are the protests at the university of Manouba (a suburb of the capital Tunis) over the banning of a mosque on the university premise (France 24 2011; Association for Friday Imams and Islamic Sciences 2011); the outcry over airing of the movie *Persepolis*—in which God is depicted—by the Nessma television channel (al-Ra'baoui 2011) and the intense discussions surrounding the redrafting of religion related articles in the constitution (Zeghal 2016; Assabah 2014a).

Another example, and of central importance to this article, is the dismissal of imams in name of

partisan neutrality of Tunisian mosques. In the weeks following the revolution many mosque congregations forced out their imams and replaced them by new ‘revolutionary’ ones. According to some estimates nearly half of the 3,000 mosques in the country had their Imam removed during this period.⁶ On the one side this process decreased the authoritarian influences over the Tunisian religious sphere. On the other hand, it opened it up to all types of religious currents. In the years that followed, as state control was reasserted, an increasing number of these revolutionary imams were dismissed. In part, these dismissals were legitimized in name of public security. In part, imams were dismissed on the basis of being ‘politicized’ more generally. These latter dismissals were legitimized by referring to article 6 in the newly redrafted Tunisian constitution. The crucial passage reads as follows:

The state protects religion, guarantees freedom of belief and conscience and religious practices, protects sanctities, and *ensures the neutrality of mosques and places of worship away from partisan instrumentalisation* (Tunisian Republic 2014, article 6. Italics by the author).

One of the most infamous examples of such dismissals related to the largest mosque in Tunisia's second city: the (Sidi) Lakhme mosque in Sfax and its revolutionary imam Ridha Jaouadi. As the position of Jaouadi became increasingly tenuous throughout 2014 and 2015, discussions arose over the definition of ‘partisan neutrality’. On the basis of which identity and what authority should partisan neutrality be defined in this context? This dual question translated in practice to two contentious issues that were directly related to national identity and state authority: What is the position of the mosque in society; and who defines credentials of imams? Contention around the topic laid bare the immensely diverging views present in Tunisia regarding the relation of religion and state to public life.

Ridha Jaouadi and the Lakhme Mosque in Sfax

In January 2011 Ridha Jaouadi, an Islamic science major and school teacher by profession, was appointed by popular demand to the largest mosque in Sfax (Tunisie Islamique 2011; Trabelsi 2011). The previous Ben Ali regime—ousted in the 2011 revolution—barred him from preaching. In January 2012 the then minister of Religious Affairs Nouredine Khadmi formalized his position. Soon, he would become infamous for his outspoken Friday sermons, often skirting close to takfirism,⁷ but always publicly denouncing the use of violence.⁸ As result, he became a polarizing public figure soon

⁶ Interview with an advisor to Nouredine Khadmi, Tunis, November 14, 2015.

⁷ Takfirism is a derogatory term for the action of describing fellow Muslims as apostates.

⁸ See for a number of (curated) examples his personal YouTube channel:
<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCXI9ff1zEiGBNcixB3nyyeQ>

after his appointment.

The stability of his position as imam was closely related to the general development of Tunisian politics. During the interim Troika government of Ennahda, CPR and Ettakatol (December 2011 to January 2014) and its minister of Religious Affairs Nouredine Khadmi, his position was relatively secure. But it became more precarious as the Tunisian state and its security services reestablished control over the country, the Nidaa Tounes party won the elections of October 2014 and as a coalition government was formed between Nidaa Tounes and Ennahda. Following increasing pressure over the preceding years, in November 2015 the then minister of Religious Affairs Othman Battikh dismissed him as imam. The decision resulted in large protests in Sfax, leading to a forced closure of the Lakhme mosque for several weeks and a security crackdown in the city.

This particular case involved a large number of actors. Through their involvement in the contentious issue of Ridha Jaouadi's dismissal—and the issue of mosque neutrality more generally—all these actors articulated their position regarding the position of religion in relation to state authority and national identity. These actors include (1) Ridha Jaouadi himself and other revolutionary imams, such as Bashir bin Hussein from Sousse. (2) A range of Islamic movements, such as Dawa wa tabligh, Salafist movements and more jihadists ones such as Ansar Charia. (3) Political parties: this includes the Nidaa Tounes party of the president Caid Essebsi and the Ennahda party. Other Islamic parties also exist in Tunisia, such as the Caliphate focused Hizb al-Tahrir and the Salafist Jabhat al-Islah. These latter two parties did not obtain any seats in parliament. (4) Labour Unions, as they are an important part of Tunisian politics. The main union in this respect is the Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail (UGTT) and its related national association of Unions for Mosque Cadres (UMC).⁹ Another example is the more Islam oriented Organisation Tunisienne du Travail (OTT) that was founded by, among others, Ridha Jaouadi in 2013. It is much smaller than the UGTT and is mostly active in Sfax.¹⁰ (5) The Ministry of Religious Affairs and its subsequent ministers: Nouredine Khadmi (December 2011–January 2014), Mounir Tlili (until February 2015) and Othman Battikh (until January 2016).¹¹ The contentious topic of Imam dismissals is used to explore how this wide variety of actors engaged in a struggle over defining mosque neutrality, and thereby explore how actors related religion and state to public life.

What is the Position of Mosques in Public Life?

This was one of the questions that emerged through discussions on the dismissal of imams and

⁹ See their website at <http://www.ugtt.org.tn/>.

¹⁰ See their facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/ott.tunisie/>.

¹¹ For an in-depth discussion, see Donker and Netterstrøm (2017).

neutrality of mosques in the country. Briefly stated, there are four different positions: that mosques provide a specialized public service in Tunisian society; that mosques constitute a crucial component of a Tunisian collectivity; that mosque are first and foremost Islamic institutions, that are crucial for sustaining Arab, Tunisian and local identities; and finally, there is the view that mosques are the center of public life and of principal importance in its overall Islamic structure. As we will see, the question of the position of mosques in Tunisian society thereby mirrors views regarding the relation between religion and national identity in Tunisian public life.

A Specialized Institution for Religious Worship

This is the view that mosques provide a specialized public service—religious worship—in Tunisian society. Among supporters of this position are both religiously conservative and liberal Tunisians. As it is perceived to be a public service, it follows that the Tunisian state should ensure its provision to all citizens. For instance, in November 2015 Minister Othman Battikh—formerly the Mufti of the Republic—made clear why he would not come back from his position to dismiss Ridha Jaouadi as imam:

His conduct is haram in shariah and runs counter to the teachings in the Islamic faith that affirm that houses of God must be kept separate from all political and partisan influences and are for prayer and worship alone. (Agence Tunis Afrique Presse 2015).

The statement, being couched in religious language, is a textbook example of a specialised view of mosques in society: they are public institutions specialised for religious worship alone. It means that the partisan neutrality from article 6 is translated as a full detachment of mosques from political affairs, as the opposite would mean the transgression of mosques' specialized functional boundaries. It is a typical 'political secularist' stance (following Fox 2015) that is argued on the basis of protecting religion from corrupting influences.

This position is combined with the view that mosques are specialised *public* institutions. It means that the state is perceived as the neutral institution—as it represents the Tunisian public—that should support and govern mosques to support the *public* position of religion in the country. Thus the UGTT related Unions for Mosque Cadres stated that the Ministry of Religious Affairs was responsible for ensuring the living standards of people working in mosques—as civil servants of the state (Boukriba 2012). When one of the senior advisors to minister Battikh was asked about his practical views on state support of mosques in the country, he answered the following:

The role of the state is to support mosque activities. [...] But this financial support is controlled by laws, to ensure that it is spend for the *public good*. [...] We have to take care that these laws are implemented properly to ensure that mosques remain accessible *to all [social] sides*. [...] Thus] Regarding the state and religion. *It is a public service supervised by the state*.¹²

In other words, state supervision of mosques is directly linked to a view of the mosque and its activities as providing a specialized public service to a Tunisian defined citizenry. As such, it *does not* imply a normative statement regarding the proper strength of religion in Tunisian society: both Battikh and his advisor legitimized their views in name of strengthening and safeguarding the public role of religion in the country. What these statements *do* imply is a normative stance regarding the proper place of religion in relation to Tunisian society and a clear demarcation between public and private spheres. Religion is seen as a distinct specialized sector of a Tunisian defined society, and as part of its public life should be managed by the Tunisian state.

An Institution Strengthening Tunisian Social Fabric

In contrast to the above, there is the position that mosques constitute a crucial component of Tunisian collective social fabric. The Ennahda party, for example, often emphasized the role of mosques in strengthening Tunisian identity and society by supporting its religious characteristics. It is an approach that builds on the assumption that a collective Islamic element exists that is crucial to the constitution of a Tunisian society. The position was especially often expressed during the first years after the 2011 revolution. In a 2012 speech at the Lakhme mosque Rached Ghannouchi, the president of Ennahda, stressed that mosques should have a place in Tunisian Muslims life by teaching them the promotion of virtue and prevention of evil (in Arabic: *Amr bil Ma'ruf wa al-Nahi an al-Munkar*) and strengthen Tunisian society as a whole (Qasmatini 2012). This vision was also explicit in the final declaration of the Ennahda general conference of the same year:

[The vision of Ennahda] is build on what can be drawn from religious speech, knowing that society is the one originally entrusted with its mission to develop the world: ‘and let there arise from you a group of people promoting all that is good, enjoining what is right and preventing what is evil’ (The Ennahda Movement 2012, 6).

Crucially, this perspective does not imply an antipathy to institutional separation between politics,

¹² Interview with an advisor to the Minister Othman Battikh, 18 November 2015, Tunis. Italics added by the author.

social activism and religious organizations. Throughout the post-revolutionary period Ennahda increasingly began to emphasize its identity as political party. It led to the statement at the 2016 general conference that Ennahda would henceforth focus solely on political activism, effectively internalizing a state-religion separation. It was subsequently clarified in the same document that:

The choice for specialization in political activities reflects our understanding of Islamic doctrine. Islam as an approach to reform calls for the use of various reform mechanisms in different areas of human activism. Reforming each area by virtue of the law which reflects Islamic doctrine (The Ennahda Movement 2016).

A strong independent position of Islam in Tunisian public life and a strong national Tunisian identity are not seen as incompatible but, on the contrary, mutually reinforcing. This also implies that a differentiation between political, state and religious powers can be seen as empowering religion. It follows that it is the role of the Tunisian state (and the Ennahda party within it) to ensure the political and economic independence of mosques, so that they can fulfill their role of strengthening Tunisian collective social fiber.¹³ In essence, they argue for the mutual reinforcement of clearly differentiated Tunisian and Islamic collective identity. Typically, in a critical response to the dismissal of Ridha Jaouadi, the Sfaxian branch of the Ennahda party emphasized that Jaouadi and other recently dismissed imams ‘had a large role in spreading justice and defending social peace in the most difficult of times’ (Hakaek Online 2015).

An Islamic Institution crucial in Sustaining Arab, Tunisian and Local Identities

Third, there are those that argue that mosques are completely independent Islamic institutions in a Muslim community. A muslim community that stands apart from—but still recognizes—Tunisian society. It follows that neutrality from partisan influences can only be based on complete mosque independence and absence of any curtailments imposed by non-religious authorities. Ridha Jaouadi is an example in this respect. In reaction to his own dismissal and accusation of political partisanship, he stated that it was all complete nonsense as ‘We [at the Lakhme mosque] are also against partisanship at mosques, as is stated in article 6 of the constitution’ (Addhamir 2015; see also Addalaji 2013). When asked what the Friday sermons should then actually be about, he continues:

¹³ In the opening address Rached Ghannouchi discussed the issue of mosque neutrality directly. It is worth to here give the quote in its entirety: *We are keen to keep religion far from political struggles and conflicts*, and we call for the complete neutrality of mosques away from political disputes and partisan utilization, so that they play a role of unification rather than division. *Yet we are astonished to see the insistence of some to exclude religion from public life*, despite the fact that the leaders of the national liberation movement considered religious sentiments to be a catalyst for revolution against occupation—just as today we see the values of Islam as a catalyst for development and promoting work, sacrifice, truthfulness, and integrity, and a positive force in our war against ISIS and extremists and supporting the state's efforts in development (Ghannouchi 2016).

The Friday sermon is not a lesson in *fiqh* [Islamic jurisprudence] as some think. Instead, it is a political meeting in the complete understanding of Islam, that brings together Muslims with their imam every week to raise among them problems that Muslims and the people face. The imam presides over the work of reform in society and contributes to it. This is all in accordance with article 6 of the constitution that prohibits partisan outreach and that provides the right to take on public, political and social affairs of the country. The above does not constitute political work, as it concerns problems and issues related to the people and the ummah (Addhamir 2015).

Imams, in other words, are men of societal reform and opinion in a primarily Islamic defined society. When the mosque is seen to be central to society, what follows is that true neutrality means that any state involvement in religious affairs is out of the question. Neutrality means full independence of the religious sphere and a strict separation between the state and religion. It is the dynamic interaction between the Muslim community and ruling elites that should be the practical result. This seems to be a surprisingly secularist position. It becomes less surprising when seen as a strategy to place religion in a dialectical relation with Tunisian national identity and its rulers.

The Principal Institution Structuring Public Life

Finally, there are those that view that Islam is the fundamental pillar of collective identity in the Muslim world, and that mosques should be the only institution structuring its society. This position places religion as direct competitor to the nation, as religion is argued to supersede any boundaries between state and society, public and private and differentiated social sectors. Even though only a small minority in Tunisia expresses this view, there are many movements that take this approach. These movements differ greatly on their specific theological views: Hizb al-Tahrir (2011), the Jihadists of *Ansar al-Sharia*, and Salafist groups of various ideological colors (Marks 2013) are examples.

As a senior representative of Hizb al-Tahrir in Sfax stated, they want ‘a Caliphate based on Islamic rule’ and that ‘Ennahda is not an Islamic party, they just work for power in a secular system. And it is the same for Ridha Jaouadi.’ Concluding that ‘We are waiting on the second revolution that will bring a true Islamic system.’¹⁴ The same position is taken by many Tunisian Salafists. In an April 2011 interview with local Salafists in Sidi Bouzid, they forcefully argued that according to them, they did not need the state, nor any of its institutions, nor any other type of organization to take care of the

¹⁴ Interview with senior representative of Hizb al-Tahrir, 22 July 2016, Sfax.

town, its religious spaces nor local security. Religion, with mosques as institutional center, would suffice.¹⁵ Instead of considering the mosque as independent from the state in structuring public life, these actors perceive it as its direct replacement.

Taking the above into consideration, Othman Battikh, Rached Ghannouchi, Ridha Jaouadi and Hizb al-Tahrir would *all* say they are supporters of a strong position of Islam in Tunisian public life and that they are defending the Islamic character of Tunisian society. As such, their diverging views are not the result of a competition between political secularism and Islam as such. Rather, they are the result of different ways of relating religion to national identity in Tunisian public life: as a specialized social sphere, a crucial element to a Tunisian social fabric, as an independent community and as a principal structure of a Muslim society. These approaches not only reflect positions regarding the position of religion in relation to the state, they also reflect diverging views on the division of society along differentiated spheres, the boundary between public and private and the relation between a community and its rulers.

Who Determines Credentials of Imams?

A second question that emerged in discussions about the dismissal of Ridha Jaouadi as imam and neutrality of mosques, was about who or what should determine imams' religious credentials. First, there is the view that credentials should be determined on the basis of popular recognition of Islamic expertise. Next to this, there is the view that an independent Islamic organization should have these responsibilities. Third, there is the position that the state is solely responsible for defining and checking religious credentials of imams. Finally, there is the view that imams credentials can be assigned on the basis of religious authority alone. The question of imams credentials directly relates to views on the relation between religion and state authority in Tunisian public life.

Popular Recognition of Islamic Authority

A first position is that imams' credentials are determined on the basis of popular recognition of religious credentials. In practice this means that mosque congregations choose the imam that will lead them. The initial appointment of Ridha Jaouadi as imam of the Lakhme mosque, after the uprising of 2011, is a prime example of such an approach (Trabelsi 2011). The same holds for the hundreds of other imams that started to lead congregations during this period. Nouredine Khadmi, as minister of Religious Affairs, implicitly recognized this type of religious credentials by providing formal state

¹⁵ Interview with Salafist activists, April 4, 2011, Sidi Bouzid.

recognition to many of the revolutionary imams in 2012. Ridha Jaouadi is one of these as his position was formally recognized in January of that year—a week after Khadmi became minister.

Having been appointed on the basis of popular recognition of his religious credentials, it is not surprising that in defending himself against accusation of inciting violence by Othman Battikh, Ridha Jaouadi states that the minister has it the wrong way around:

It is the minister that should be dismissed. It is he who has become a danger to public safety in our country. His decisions do not reflect the general interest of the country and challenge the will of the people and worshippers. When you go against ten thousand worshippers' attachment to their imam the minister is not respecting the law, or the will of the constitution. It is because he contradicts the will of worshippers, as if he is implementing his own views in name of the law (Addhamir 2015).

Jaouadi argues that his legitimacy stems from popular support of his congregation and that the neutrality clause in article 6 of the constitution therefore supports his position as imam. He mixes popular legitimacy with religious authority to make the case for religious independence. By forcefully arguing against state interference Ridha Jaouadi is in essence making a secular argument for separation between state and religion: state authority turns partisan when it interferes in the Islamic sphere by defining religious credentials. Only true independence can solve tensions between state and religious authority.

Islamic Organizations

This position moves recognition of imams' credentials to an independent public agency. Such an agency can be founded and supported by the Tunisian state, but is never supervised or controlled by it. One of the principal proponents of this position is Nouredine Khadmi, the minister of Religious Affairs between December 2011 and January 2014. Following his initial recognition of revolutionary imams, he set out to reform Tunisian state management of the religious sphere. As one of his senior advisors recalls:

I was the person at the time, around 2012, that was responsible for the issue of religious speech in the mosque and interaction between imams and the state. It was our struggle to develop and support religious speech, while retaining the freedom of imams. [...] The issue is that imams are supposed to talk about any social issue—including politics—and do this on the

basis of religion alone. It implies that we, as state, cannot control them.¹⁶

The dilemma they faced was to define an institutional framework in which credentials of imams were monitored (in name of developing and supporting religious speech) while still ensuring the independence of the Tunisian religious sphere (al-Kalbusi 2013). In practice this meant providing more freedom to religious educational institutes and creating a number of independent Islamic institutes that could mediate between state and religious authority. One of his first initiatives was a Council of Religious Elders (*Haya` ahl al-Dhikr*) that was imagined to be an institution manned by senior religious figures tasked to mediate conflicts within the Tunisian religious sphere and between the religious sphere and the state—specifically around defining proper religious discourse for imams. Khadmi also tried to initiate a similar (but monthly) Forum of Moderation (*Muntada Wasati*) with a similar aim.¹⁷

Through his attempts to create state approved fora in which Islamic authority could be exercised in questions of religious expertise and credentials, Khadmi attempted to explicitly mitigate tensions that arise when state and religious authority mix in public life. None of the initiatives made it passed the proposal phase.¹⁸

The Tunisian State

This is the position that the state should control and determine credentials of imams. A typical statement in this respect was from the advisor to the former minister Battikh that stated in April 2015 that ‘only seven percent of Tunisian imams have proper Islamic credentials!’ Going on to note that ‘some imams have other university credentials, engineering and the like, but not Islamic sciences.’¹⁹ What he actually stated was that only seven percent of the Tunisian imams have followed Islamic sciences *at state recognized universities*. He did not recognize any religious credentials obtained from non-formalized religious classes at mosques or purely Islamic educational institutes.

Next to this, it implies that any imam at a Tunisian mosque must have been assigned by the ministry directly; as popular recognition of religious credentials is not recognized. Mounir Tlili, the minister of Religious Affairs that succeeded Nouredine Khadmi, stated at the end of his tenure in February 2015 that following his efforts to ‘neutralize Tunisian mosques’ only two imams remained in the country

¹⁶ Interview former advisor to Nouredine Khadmi, 14 November 2015, Tunis. See also Ziyani (2015).

¹⁷ Interview former advisor to Nouredine Khadmi, 14 November 2015, Tunis.

¹⁸ They were blocked at the National Constitutive Assembly by leftist parties (who charged that these were attempts at creating a theocracy) and by the Mufti of the Republic at the time, who feared for the devaluation of his position (Dima Online 2012).

¹⁹ Interview with an advisor to the Minister Othman Battikh, 18 November 2015, Tunis.

that were ‘not appointed by the ministry’: Bashir bin Hussein and Ridha Jaouadi (Aljarida 2014). The same holds for Fadhel Achour, president of the UGTT related Unions for Mosque Cadres, that publicly complained in June 2013 that Nouredine Khadmi had ‘bypassed his authority as minister in appointing imams as he allowed the congregations themselves to do this’ (Ibrahim 2013). The statements are technically true as Bin Hussein and Jaouadi were appointed by popular request and later formally *recognized* by Nouredine Khadmi. But they also imply a view that it is ultimately the appointment by the ministry that formalizes religious credentials of imams.

In a slight variation from this point, this view also implies that religious accreditation can be delegated to state organizations at non-national levels: one example is the turn to Moroccan and Algerian organizations in the education of Tunisian imams. Minister Tlili, for instance, sent imams to Morocco for religious training (Assabah 2014b). Since his tenure the cooperation between the Moroccan and Algerian state is explicitly mentioned on the website of the ministry (Ministry of Religious Affairs 2014).

On the Basis of Religious Authority Alone

Finally, there is the position that there should be no involvement of the state or citizens in defining religious credentials, as it should be solely based on a religious authority. This position is reflected in the more general discussion among Salafist movements over what constitutes the *ahl al-Hal wa al-Aqd* (the group that loosens and binds) or the group of people that represents religious authority and can decide over the legitimacy of, for instance, an Islamic State and its Caliph (Bunzel 2015). It was a discussion that was not raised in direct reference to the case of Mosque neutrality in Tunisia, and is arguably of limited practical influence on defining state-religion relations in most Muslim majority countries.

All the actors above, again, are active in name of strengthening religion in Tunisia—including those actors arguing for strict state control. The latter believe that the Tunisian state is the proper institution to ensure its neutrality and proper functioning. The same holds for the first two positions: Khadmi aimed to strengthen religion by creating state initiated Islamic organizations, and Ridha Jaouadi argued for strict independence of the religious sphere—strictly speaking also a secularist position. These positions, rather, are expressions of the different ways in which the relation between state and religious authority can be defined in practice: through popular recognition, independent public agencies, state supremacy or religious supremacy. Again, these approaches not only reflect views

regarding the relation between religion and state: they reflect more generally views on the role of popular will, associational life, the authority of Islamic law and the state in public life.

Conclusion

This article provided a critical response to the competition perspective in studies on secularization, secularism and mobilized religion (Fox 2015). The article focused on one particular contentious issue: the dismissal of Ridha Jaouadi from the largest mosque in Sfax in name of mosque neutrality. In relation to this issue, the article explored two practical questions: What is the position of mosques in Tunisian society and, second, who determines the credentials of imams? The article argued that actors differ in how religion and state should relate to public life, not the *extent* that they should be integral or separate from each other.

Regarding the first question, a so-called political secularist view (of the mosque as specialized space for praying in Tunisian society) can be made in name of strengthening religion. Ennahda, for instance, explicitly argued that societal specialization and separation of religion and politics are *not* mutually exclusive with a comprehensive view of Islam. Also actors that defend the supremacy of religion in defining public norms—such as Ridha Jaouadi himself—use separation-of-religion-and-state arguments. This is because these positions differ on how actors relate religion and state to public life; not along the extent that religion should be integral or separate from state affairs.

The same holds regarding the question who determines the credentials of imams. Ridha Jaouadi mixes popular legitimacy and religious authority to defend the independence of the religious sphere in the accreditation of imams credentials. Nouredine Khadmi attempted to create state approved fora in which tensions over religious authority would be debated and mitigated, without placing one authority over the other. Third, there was the view that the state should be in full control over religious accreditation in the country. Although the latter position seems to run counter to a strong position for religion in public life, it also turns the state into the principal actor defining religious credentials in the country—removing any separation between religious and state authority. Summarized, in articulating these claims, positions emerge that are hard to place along a political secularism–religion scale. This is because, again, these positions differ on how actors relate religion and state to public life; not along the extent that religion should be integral or separate from state affairs.

The example of state control over mosques relates directly to state involvement in religious affairs. But the observed positions also apply to other policy domains. One example is education. In the Tunisian educational system there are religious classes at the elementary and middle school level, with

no private religious educational system present before 2011. It meant that the large majority of Tunisians received about the same years of religious education. But when asked in interviews, answers differed widely. Additionally, conservative Muslims would often reply that they had received little to no religious education.²⁰ When asked to explain their answers, interviewees clarified they did not perceive state provided education as properly religious. When pressed, multiple interviewees argued that religious education could only be provided through non-state, private and mosque based, organizations. In other words: religious education could only be based on religious authority and state involvement rendered it unislamic.²¹ Translated to a policy position, this implies that the state should provide *less* religious education in name of *strengthening* Islam. Again, this specific position is not a result from a competition between political secularism and religion. Rather, it is a result of how these interviewees relate religion and state to public life. There is no reason why the same logic would not apply to issues of placing religion in the constitution, religious discrimination laws, personal status codes and any other type of state regulation.

The article started with a theoretical discussion of Fox's competition perspective that argues that the study of state-religion relations should be focused on political secularism, as an ideology that is 'competing with religion over this aspect of the public agenda' (Fox 2015, 2; see also Kuru 2009). (Dis)similarities observed in actual state-religion relations between countries are then said to result from a competition between secular and religious forces. The competition perspective provides both a parsimonious view on state-religion relations and it corresponds with the popular view that secularization theories have failed because religion is fighting back against its secular foes. It is tempting in research to build conceptual scales on the basis of observed extremes. It gives an air of parsimony to often multifaceted social issues. Striving for parsimony is not a negative endeavour in and of itself, but it should not stand in the way of explanatory power of the theoretical framework. In this particular case, the empirical outcomes that emerge around a conflict regarding state-religion relations not only reflect difference in the extent that religion and state should be integral or separate, but also how actors relate the two. It means that a competition perspective alone provides limited explanatory value for the how and why these options emerge. Taken to the extreme, it can obfuscate the multifaceted character of these conflict and the ways in which individual actions conditions how state-religion relations take shape.

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²⁰ Interview director of an Islamic school, 18 July 2016, Sfax; Interview director of an Islamic kindergarten, 15 May 2015, Sfax; Interview employee Islamic charitable association, 12 May 2015, Sfax; and others.

²¹ For instance, interview director of an Islamic school, 18 July 2016, Sfax.

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