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THE EU'S ENGAGEMENT WITH 'MODERATE' POLITICAL ISLAM THE CASE OF ENNAHDA

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the European Union's engagement – or lack thereof – with Islamist political parties in North Africa following the Arab uprisings. By delving into the case of Tunisia's Ennahda, it shows that the party's growing moderation trajectory has been matched by a greater pragmatic engagement by the EU during the period 2011–16. It is argued that this new trend is explained by a partial shift in the frames that the EU employs to interpret ongoing changes in the Middle East and North Africa region as well as its interests and potential role in the region.

Introduction

Before the Arab upheavals in 2011, the European Union (EU)'s relations with Islamist actors in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region were almost absent. Islamists were predominantly excluded from the institutional and political scene in the countries of the region, where authoritarian regimes held a strong control over any form of expression, dissent and contestation. The Algerian experience of 1991 had already alarmed Western countries, including the European ones, to the point that they were happy to support authoritarian secular governments, perceiving them as the only ones able to guarantee stability in the region and thus Western interests.¹ However, this suddenly changed with the Arab uprisings and the transition period that followed. Not only did some secular authoritarian regimes collapse under pressure from popular protests, but new political actors emerged and acquired a prominent public presence across the region. Among these, Islamist parties came out as winners of the elections in Tunisia, Morocco and Egypt, becoming leading forces of Islamist-dominated parliamentary majorities and governments. Faced with this changed panorama, the EU found itself in need of reacting and (partially) revising its policies.

Against this background, this paper analyses EU–Ennahda relations, taking them as an illustration of the EU's changing approach towards political Islam in North Africa since 2011. It argues that the EU has moved from a policy of complete lack of engagement with political Islam in the region in the period preceding the Arab uprisings to partial engagement with some Islamist actors in their aftermath. While many Islamists are still looked at with suspicion or are outright ostracised, as the case of Hamas demonstrates, the EU has progressively started to engage with those groups that it considers as 'moderate', i.e., those who do not threaten the EU's secular and liberal identity and values, have been formally and legitimately elected, and have explicitly renounced violence, of which Ennahda is an example.

This new engagement with political Islam is explained by the progressive shift from an essentialist to a more nuanced understanding of Islamist actors on the part of the EU. From conceiving all forms and manifestations of political Islam as a threat, the EU has started to appreciate the existence of different types of ideological and political strands within this broad category. Against the backdrop of changing domestic and regional dynamics in North Africa, the EU's pragmatic need to find political interlocutors is filtered through its perceptions of what a moderate actor looks like. The fact that moderate

¹ Timo Behr, 'EU Foreign Policy and Political Islam: Towards a New Entente in the Post-Arab Spring Era?', *The International Spectator* 48/1 (2013), pp. 20–33; Said Haddadi, 'Political Securitization and Democratization in the Maghreb: Ambiguous Discourses and Fine-Tuning Practices for a Security Partnership', in Emanuel Adler, Federica Bicchì, Beverly Crawford and Raffaella Del Sarto (eds), *The Convergence of Civilizations. Constructing a Mediterranean Region* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2006), pp. 168–90. The only exception to this lack of engagement can be found in the EU relations with the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Turkey since the early 2000s. This case is however rather specific, given that Turkey has been part of the enlargement framework.

actors are not seen as a threat and are in positions of power creates room for engagement and feeds back, at the same time, into the way the EU frames political Islam.

A few clarifications concerning the scope of the paper are necessary. First, this paper focuses on political parties and, more precisely, on the case of Ennahda. While political Islam is a multifaceted phenomenon, with ramifications at both the institutional and civil society levels, political parties have played a prominent role in the context of the political and institutional transitions in the region since 2011, an aspect that was also at the core of the EU's attention and policies towards North African countries. The case of Ennahda stands out as its relations to the EU are an illustrative example of the new frame of 'moderation' as a basis for pragmatic engagement in EU foreign policy. Whenever necessary, references to other Islamist actors will still be made to contextualise the case of Ennahda within the Tunisian and regional landscapes. Second, this paper focuses on the EU at an institutional level without necessarily implying that the EU is a monolithic and homogeneous entity. While there is variance across EU institutions, this paper identifies common trends in their approach to political Islam.

The EU's Engagement with Ennahda's Moderating Trajectory

Founded in 1981 by Rachid Ghannouchi, Ennahda – and its predecessor the Mouvement Tendance Islamique (MTI) – gradually developed into one of Tunisia's major opposition movements, choosing the strategy of participation in the system over revolutionary change.² Banned and persecuted under the Bourguiba and Ben Ali regimes, the party made a swift and successful comeback to the post-revolutionary political arena by first emerging in the elections to the Constituent Assembly in October 2011. Some authors have traced the history of exclusion and violent repression of Ennahda under the previous authoritarian regimes and consider that to be a powerful explanatory factor of the party's most recent moderating experience.³ Contrary to this view, the most prominent reading of

² During President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's first term, Ennahda showed its readiness to participate in what was in any case a rigged game and did not openly challenge the hegemony of the regime. However, the regime did not allow Ennahda to take part in elections as a party, but several of its members were allowed to run as independent candidates, leading to harsh repression in the wake of the first positive electoral results. Ennahda's activities were banned in 1991 and its members persecuted. In reaction to the regime's harsh crack down, many members of the party leadership were forced into exile. Ennahda's history of participation and repression differed to some extent from the path of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood who, since the 1970s, had chosen to position itself more as the moral arbiter of Egyptian society and was lacking a political party organisation. See Laura Guazzone, 'Ennahda Islamists and the Test of Government in Tunisia', *The International Spectator* 48/4 (2013), p. 42.

³ Francesco Cavatorta and Fabio Merone, 'Moderation through Exclusion? The Journey of the Tunisian Ennahda from Fundamentalist to Conservative Party', *Democratization* 20/5 (2013), pp. 857–75. These authors suggest that in the case of Ennahda, repression did not lead to radicalisation but supported the adoption of global liberal discourses on democracy and market economy. In addition, they contend that without this opening, Ennahda would not have been able to reach a broad Tunisian constituency. In this regard, Ennahda's moderation is reminiscent of Turkey's AKP experience. Cihan Tugal, *The Fall of the Turkish Model, How the Arab Uprisings brought down Islamic Liberalism* (London: Verso, 2016).

Ennahda's trajectory moves from the assumptions of the so-called 'moderation through inclusion' paradigm, which holds that inclusion in the political process makes Islamist parties more moderate.⁴ Irrespective of the significant flaws of this hypothesis, it appears to be of some value to understanding Ennahda's trajectory. The 'moderation through inclusion' paradigm is usually articulated around two dimensions: the former is what is usually referred to as 'tactical' or 'behavioural' moderation, while the latter is called 'ideological' or 'substantial' moderation. These terms clearly point to the distinction between moderation happening as a result of pragmatic compromise and concessions within the political realm on the one hand, and moderation of ideological positions, on the other. In the case of Ennahda, it makes sense to speak of political compromises out of political necessity followed by a thorough ideological shift. This two-step process completes the moderation trajectory of the former Islamist party.⁵

The best example of the first step of the moderation trajectory stemmed as a result of Ennahda's successfully entering the Tunisian political fray thanks to its participation in the elections.⁶ After years of authoritarian top-down secularisation policies, and despite the fact that Ennahda was not a driving force behind the events of December 2010–January 2011, the Islamist party emerged as one of the major beneficiaries of political change in the country. Ennahda's moderate Islamist messages converged with the call of Tunisia's growing, but politically and culturally neglected socially-conservative Arabophone middle class, which came to represent the backbone of the party's electorate. Representatives of the urban pious middle class had long felt sidelined by the Francophone elites who have dominated political, cultural and economic life ever since the country's independence. Ennahda was able to successfully present itself as the voice of this pious middle class and the champion for social justice. Not only did this appeal to a broad constituency within the Tunisian society, but it also resonated well with the country's Western partners, particularly the EU, as this focus on social justice and an end to corruption was matched by the continuation of existing neoliberal economic policies. Despite some initiatives to deepen regional integration with neighbouring countries and extend economic relations with other countries of the region like Turkey and Qatar, Europe in general, and France in particular, have continued to be Tunisia's primary trading partners.⁷ Once in power, 'the combination of respect for private property and free enterprise with charity and anti-corruption stances' has allowed Ennahda to strike a balance between reassuring foreign

⁴ Jilian Schwedler, 'Can Islamists Become Moderates? Rethinking the Inclusion-Moderation Hypothesis', *World Politics* 63/2 (2011), pp. 347–376.

⁵ Kasper Ly Netterstrøm, 'The Islamists Compromise in Tunisia', *Journal of Democracy* 26/4 (2015), pp. 110–124.

⁶ Ennahda's participation in Tunisian politics has been marked by gradualism and alliance-seeking attitudes. For example, prior to the 2011 elections to the Constituent Assembly, Ennahda's leader Rachid Ghannouchi declared that even if the party had an overall majority it would seek a coalition with other political (secular) forces. Monica Marks, 'Tunisia's Ennahda: Rethinking Islamism in the context of ISIS and the Egyptian Coup', *Brookings Working Paper* (2015). Available at https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Tunisia_Marks-FINALE-5.pdf (accessed 20 March 2017).

⁷ Amel Boubekeur, 'Islamists, Secularists and Old Regime Elites in Tunisia: Bargained Competition', *Mediterranean Politics* 21/1 (2016), pp. 107–127.

investors, on the one hand, and responding to the domestic Islamist camp's calls for more social justice on the other.⁸

The October 2011 electoral victory was both the result of and a starting point for tactical moderation followed by ideological moderation. In the context of the prolonged and contentious constitution-making process, which lasted from October 2011 till February 2014, Ennahda displayed its acceptance of principles it had previously ideologically opposed. Three of them are of crucial interest to understand the trajectory of the party. First, the constitution declares Tunisia a 'civil state', thus rejecting any form of religious interference into the state. Second, there is no reference to *shari'ā* (Islamic law) but only to the 'teachings of Islam', thus explicitly excluding any role for the Islamic religious corps. Finally, the new Tunisian constitution grants the right to 'freedom of conscience and belief'.⁹ By accepting this content of the constitution after engaging in negotiations and compromises in the context of the troika-based government, Ennahda was able to consolidate its pragmatic identity in a way that matched the normative definition of moderation accepted by external players, including the EU. This definition includes references to values and principles, such as the civilian character of the state and the granting of the freedom of conscience and belief, in addition to Ennahda's renouncing of violence and participating in formal politics according to the democratic rules of the game. Other signs of Ennahda's tendency to share power and to prioritise inclusion were its respect of civil rights and liberties of all individuals, and its more balanced representation of women in political bodies. Ennahda agreed to drop an initial reference to the 'complementary role' of women to men that appeared in one of the earlier drafts of the constitutional text sponsored by male and female Islamist members of parliament. The 2014 Constitution guarantees equality before the law for men and women, and the 1956 personal status code granting women equality with men remains in force.

The moderation and pragmatism demonstrated by Ennahda opened the way to the establishment of working relationships with the EU as a key partner in the country's transition towards democracy, a process which further reinforced the moderation trajectory of the Islamist party.¹⁰ At the top of the 2011 EU agenda towards the MENA region in general, and Tunisia in particular, stood the issue of political reform and governance. In the EU's view, the first steps to accomplish these goals were, on the one hand, the implementation of sound electoral processes through fair procedures and competition, and on the other, the drafting of a new constitution that guarantees basic freedoms and rights to the population, and means to enforce them, as well as vertical and horizontal accountability. These priorities became the basis for the development of a working relationship between the EU and Ennahda, in light of its role as a key political actor in post-uprisings Tunisia.

⁸ Dalacoura calls this attitude 'pious neoliberalism'. See Katerina Dalacoura, 'Islamism and Neoliberalism in the Aftermath of the 2011 Arab Uprisings: The Freedom and Justice Party in Egypt and Nahda in Tunisia', in Emel Akcali (ed), *Neoliberal Governmentality and the Future of the State in the Middle East and North Africa* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 64.

⁹ Netterstrøm, 'The Islamists Compromise in Tunisia'.

¹⁰ See 'Tunisie: Conclusions du Conseil Affaires étrangères', *Conseil de l'Union Européenne*. Available at http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_Data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/126043.pdf (accessed 28 August 2014).

During the constitution-making phase, the EU demonstrated its willingness to engage with the moderate Islamist party in power on the basis of common values. In the joint declaration that the two parties made on the occasion of the Tunisian Islamist Prime Minister Hamadi Jebali's visit to the European Commission in February 2012, it was stated that:

The visit has enabled the launch of a high-level political dialogue between the new Tunisian authorities and the EU authorities with a view to initiate a new phase of bilateral relations allowing, *based on shared values*, for stronger support from the EU for Tunisia and progressive integration into the European Single Market.¹¹

Furthermore, the EU has made use of a number of instruments to support the country's transition towards democracy. Since 2011 and up to June 2016, Tunisia has received more than €1 billion in grants, over €890 million of which provided through the European Neighbourhood Policy. During 2011–2013, Tunisia received €445 million in development assistance under the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI), amounting to nearly twice the sum initially earmarked for the country for that period. The majority was allocated to support the economy, with a focus on alleviating (youth) unemployment problems.¹² Tunisia was also the first beneficiary of funding (€155 million) through the Support for Partnership, Reforms and Inclusive Growth (SPRING) Programme, which provides assistance on a 'more for more' basis for partner countries showing sustained commitment to, and progress towards, democratic reform. The financial and material assistance provided to Tunisia was matched by the establishment of a privileged partnership between the country and the EU in 2012. This special status reflects the EU's commitment to supporting the country's transition as it tackles a number of interrelated challenges and has been reiterated at the highest political level, such as during the special attendance of the head of the Tunisian government, Habib Essid, at the Foreign Affairs Council meeting of 20 July 2015, chaired by the High Representative Federica Mogherini.¹³ During the meeting, the EU stated its will 'to support Tunisia in its democratic transition, at this difficult time for its economy, especially for its tourism industry, and at a difficult time in terms of security challenges and the fight against terrorism, in which we are all united.'¹⁴

With rising concerns about the spread of terrorism and insecurity in the MENA region, the EU has become increasingly sensitive to the need to fight instability in the region for its own security and to prop up the fragile democratic Tunisian transition to democracy. Among the security concerns that have seen their salience growing between 2014–2015 is

¹¹ 'Relations UE–Tunisie: Déclaration Conjointe 'Vers un Partenariat Privilégié'', [EU–Tunisia Relations: Joint Declaration 'Towards a Privileged Partnership], *European Commission*, 2 February 2012. Available at http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-12-62_en.htm (accessed 28 August 2014).

¹² Vera Van Hüllen, *EU Democracy Promotion and the Arab Spring* (New York: Palgrave, 2015).

¹³ See 'Relations between the EU and Tunisia', *European Union*, 15 September 2016. Available at https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/10_tunisia_4pg.pdf (accessed 27 July 2016).

¹⁴ See 'Statement by High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini following her meeting with the Tunisian Prime Minister Habib Essid', *European Union External Action*, 20 July 2015. Available at http://eeas.europa.eu/statements-eeas/2015/150720_02_en.htm (accessed 5 August 2016).

the nexus between terrorism and violent radicalisation which is perceived as particularly worrisome for EU member states in light of both Europe's heightened exposure to them due to its geographical interdependence with the MENA region, and to Europe's own internal problems of social cohesion and integration. Another area of growing concern for EU authorities relates to the lack of socio-economic reforms and governance, which feeds instability. Most countries in the region have seen their socio-economic situation significantly deteriorate since 2011, with the root causes of the Arab uprisings, like unemployment, poverty, inequality and corruption, still in place. This is perceived to be linked in a mutually reinforcing, vicious circle with the rise of insecurity and the risk of violent radicalisation among some of the most vulnerable groups, particularly the youth, and second-generation European citizens originally coming from the MENA region. Against this backdrop, Tunisia has become the target of increased cooperation both by EU institutions and EU member states to address the root causes of violent radicalisation and to offset the disruptive impact of the Libyan conflict on Tunisia.¹⁵

The different forms of engagement the EU has employed with Ennahda have been instrumental in further anchoring Tunisia and its moderate Islamist party to democratic and liberal values. On the one hand, this has resulted in Ennahda further distancing itself from the more radical Salafist factions in light of their often-ambiguous stance towards radicalisation and terrorism episodes. On the other, Ennahda's moderation trajectory has been boosted to the point that the party congress that took place in May 2016 saw its religious authority and political leader, Rachid Ghannouchi, declare that there is no longer room for political Islam in post-Arab Spring Tunisia.¹⁶ As a justification for breaking with the tradition of political Islam, other party cadres stated that 'now that Ennahda is engaged in open, legal party politics under a new Constitution, which it helped write, and competes for national leadership, the Islamist label [has] become more a burden than a benefit.'¹⁷

The public renunciation of Islamism has been saluted by many observers as a strategic decision to appease secular elites in the country and the West or, more genuinely, as a sign of the completion of the process of ideological moderation undergone by the party in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings, thus acquiring a new, post-Islamist identity, similar to that of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Turkey.¹⁸ This stems from the party's pragmatic approach to politics – it does not involve a complete departure from Islamic

¹⁵ See 'Programmation de l'Instrument Européen de Voisinage (IEV) (2014–2017) Cadre Unique d'Appui pour l'appui de l'UE à la Tunisie (2014–2015)', *European External Action Service*. Available at http://collections.internetmemory.org/haeu/20160313172652/http://eeas.europa.eu/enp/pdf/financing-the-enp/tunisia_2014_2015_programming_document_fr.pdf (accessed 12 June 2016).

¹⁶ Rached Ghannouchi, 'From Political Islam to Muslim Democracy: The Ennahda Party and the Future of Tunisia', *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2016. Available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/tunisia/political-islam-muslim-democracy> (accessed 24 June 2017).

¹⁷ Hussein Ibish, 'Islamism Is Dead! Long Live Muslim Democrats', *The New York Times*, 2 June 2016. Available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/03/opinion/tunisias-new-revolution.html?mcubz=1> (accessed 25 June 2017).

¹⁸ Dalacoura, 'Islamism and Neoliberalism in the Aftermath of the 2011 Arab Uprisings'; Boubekeur, 'Islamists, Secularists and Old Regime Elites in Tunisia'.

tenets, but rather from ideological conceptions that have proven to be impossible to be implemented through electoral gains. At the same time, domestically, while a more moderate course underpins Ennahda's integration into the incumbent system as a democratic yet conservative Islamic party, this strategy also risks further stirring internal debates to the detriment of cohesion. In reality, Ennahda has never been a monolithic body but it has always been characterised by different layers and divergent tendencies ranging from moderate to more conservative both from the ideological-political and the economic points of view. The struggle to manage the expectations of the ultra-conservative ideological segment while attempting to integrate into the hegemonic system by appeasing secular elites will be the ultimate test for the party's political future.

Framing the 'Moderate': The EU and Political Islam

This new trend in the EU's approach to Ennahda reflects a partially changed understanding of political Islam. While the Union and its member states' material interests and preoccupations for security and stability are important, these are shaped and conceived through the ways in which the EU makes sense of its environment and a changing reality. EU policies are thus shaped and implemented on the basis of different frames, defined as ways of interpreting information by 'promot[ing] a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation'.¹⁹ Frames simplify reality by organising events and processes in a way that permits to identify an issue and provides a roadmap for addressing it.²⁰ This way, they are cognitive tools that shape how actors perceive themselves, their interests and their actions.

This also applies to the way in which the EU makes sense of the events in the MENA region and how it responds to them. For a long time, the EU framed political Islam as a monolithic phenomenon and an existential threat. The lack of understanding of the complexity of Islamists in the MENA region emerges from documents produced in the framework of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership and the European Neighbourhood Programme, in which political Islam is seldom mentioned and, if so, only in broad terms that refer to 'Islamist movements' or 'Islamist political parties'.

The idea of political Islam as a rather monolithic entity and, more importantly, as a threat to the EU is not surprising, if one considers that the EU's self-conception, which is well reflected in its foundational treaties and its domestic and foreign policies,²¹ is based on secularism and liberalism (intended both politically as supportive of pluralism and civil

¹⁹ Robert M. Entman, 'Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm', *Journal of Communication* 43/4 (1993), p. 52.

²⁰ Lisa V. Bardwell, 'Problem-Framing: A Perspective on Environmental Problem-Solving', *Environmental Management* 15/5 (1991), pp. 603-12; David Dery, 'Agenda Setting and Problem Definition', *Policy Studies* 21/1 (2000), pp. 37-47.

²¹ See 'Consolidated Version of the Treaty on European Union', *Official Journal of the European Union* 326, 26 October 2012. Available at <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:12012M/TXT&from=EN> (accessed 3 May 2016).

and political liberties, and economically as promoter of market-friendly policies). The liberal aspects are rather evident in EU democracy promotion policies in the MENA region, as the EU has always fostered specific models of democracy and civil society matching its liberal ideas,²² with less attention given to the specific needs of the targets of its policies.²³ Moreover, and based on the appreciation of the benefits of secularism, separation between religious principles and political activities – and hence the privatisation of religion – has always been highly praised by the EU and viewed as the only form of political organisation positively associated with a stable and secure environment.²⁴

The EU's identity being the result of a process of *othering*,²⁵ whereby the *other* is depicted as 'inherently different and as a threat to its identity',²⁶ political Islam was regarded as an undifferentiated threat to the EU's own secular and liberal identity. As Shakman Hurd argues, the secular reading of political Islam made by the West portrays it as either a backlash against modernity or a threat incompatible to modern and Western principles of society.²⁷ Related to this, both the role that political Islam attributes to religion in the public sphere and some Islamist positions on a number of issues, such as women's rights and religious minorities, are also perceived as rather problematic from a liberal perspective.²⁸ Due to the EU's monolithic view and the perception of an identity threat, Islamist actors were thus not engaged with. The EU's only form of engagement with political Islam, when occurring, was defined in cultural terms, via the inter-cultural dialogue which mainly reinforced the reproduction of existing stereotypes.²⁹

²² Milja Kurki, 'Governmentality and EU Democracy Promotion: The European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights and the Construction of Democratic Civil Societies', *International Political Sociology* 5 (2011), pp. 349–66; Anne Wetzel and Jan Orbie, 'Promoting Embedded Democracy? Researching the Substance of EU Democracy Promotion', *European Foreign Affairs Review* 16/5 (2011), pp. 565–88.

²³ Michelle Pace, 'The EU's Interpretation of the 'Arab Uprisings': Understanding the Different Visions about Democratic Change in EU–MENA Relations', *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 52/5 (2014), pp. 969–84.

²⁴ David Campbell, *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998); Luca Mavelli, 'Security and Secularization in International Relations', *European Journal of International Relations* 18/1 (2012), pp. 177–99.

²⁵ Iver B. Neumann, *Uses of the Other: 'The East' in European Identity Formation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991); Edward Said, *Orientalism* [Western Conceptions of the Orient] (Middlesex: Penguin, 1991).

²⁶ Bahar Rumelili, 'Constructing Identity and Relating to Difference: Understanding the EU's Mode of Differentiation', *Review of International Studies* 30/1 (2004), pp. 27–47; Neumann, *Uses of the Other*; Iver B. Neumann and Jennifer M. Welsh, 'The Other in European Self-Definition: An Addendum to the Literature on International Society', *Review of International Studies* 17/4 (1991), pp. 327–48; Michelle Pace, 'The Ugly Duckling of Europe: The Mediterranean in the Foreign Policy of the European Union', *Journal of European Area Studies* 10/2 (1991), pp. 189–209.

²⁷ Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, 'Political Islam and Foreign Policy in Europe and the United States', *Foreign Policy Analysis* 3 (2007), pp. 345–67.

²⁸ See 'Women's Rights During Democratic Transitions', *European Parliament* (2002). Available at [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/etudes/join/2012/457119/EXPO-JOIN_ET\(2012\)457119_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/etudes/join/2012/457119/EXPO-JOIN_ET(2012)457119_EN.pdf) (accessed 27 July 2016).

²⁹ Behr, 'EU Foreign Policy and Political Islam'; François Burgat, 'Europe and the Arab World: The

This essentialist reading of political Islam was partially scratched after the 9/11 attacks, when the EU started to draw a distinction between terrorism/radical Islamism and moderate forms of political Islam. While the former continued to be perceived as an existential threat to the West, the EU became more sensitive to the need to identify potential interlocutors.³⁰ By describing ‘moderate’ actors as those ‘Muslim organisations and faith groups that reject the distorted version of Islam put forward by al-Qaida and others’ in the 2005 EU Strategy for Combating Radicalisation and Recruitment to Terrorism as well as ‘those political organisations which promote democracy by non-violent means’ by the European Parliament,³¹ there was a growing recognition that political Islam had to be treated differently. Proposals about the need for engagement with non-violent and non-revolutionary Islamist actors were also made by the Task Force on Political Islamism – a group created in 2006 within the Commission’s Directorate General for External Relations with the aim of offering training programmes on and gathering significant knowledge about Islamism worldwide.³² However, this initial appreciation of political Islam as a rather variegated and complex phenomenon did not lead to a revision of EU policies towards Islamists. While some EU delegations had some informal contact with Islamist actors, either on the ground or in Europe, engagement did not amount to any type of official, and even less so, coherent and systematic approach by the EU as a whole.³³

The ‘game changer’ in the framing of political Islam were the Arab uprisings, which were followed by the electoral victories of some Islamist parties, like Ennahda in Tunisia and the newly-constituted Egyptian Freedom and Justice Party (FJP). Moreover, a variety of Islamist actors, including Salafists, former jihadists, independent Islamists and Sufis, started to occupy the space left by secular and leftist forces, after years, if not decades, of exclusion, co-optation and repression.³⁴ Compared to other still important events happening in the EU’s neighbourhood or beyond, the Arab uprisings represented a deeper and more structural change that the EU could not but react and adjust to. In other words, the EU had to wake up to a different reality that challenged its old views of political Islam and opened up the way for a reframing process that has led to the categorisation of ‘moderate’ Islamists.

The Islamist *other* has indeed started to be assessed in light of the behaviours and stances adopted by individual groups or parties within each specific context. By becoming more sensitive to the existing differences among them, the EU has progressively identified some Islamist parties as being, if not fully compatible with, at least not a direct threat to its own identity, values and interests. The category of ‘moderation’, which started to be sketched

Dilemma of Recognising Counterparts’, *International Politics* 46/5 (2009), pp. 616–35; Sarah Wolff, ‘US and EU Engagement with Islamists in the Middle East and North Africa’, *Transatlantic Academy Paper Series* 3 (Washington DC: Transatlantic Academy, 2015).

³⁰ Behr, ‘EU Foreign Policy and Political Islam’.

³¹ ‘Arab World: What Strategy should the European Union Adopt?’, *European Parliament* 2006/2172(INI). Available at <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/oeil/popups/ficheprocedure.do?lang=en&reference=2006/2172>.

³² Kristina Kausch, *Plus ça Change: Europe’s Engagement with Moderate Islamists* (Madrid: FRIDE, 2009).

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Cavatorta and Merone, ‘Moderation through Exclusion?’.

in the early 2000s, now acquired clearer features, referring to those Islamists that do not openly challenge the EU's secular and liberal identity, adhere to democratic principles, accept liberal conceptions in both the political and the economic domains in their exercise of power, and temper their religious discourse.³⁵ The acceptance of the democratic rules of free and competitive elections and the respect for political and civil rights are concomitantly met with the renunciation of violence. In addition, and as suggested by an EU official, moderate Islamist actors are often considered to be those that 'work with us and contribute to serving our perceived interests'.³⁶

Given the relational nature of moderation, the 'moderate' Islamist parties are implicitly conceived in opposition to terrorist groups and other violent Islamist actors, or conservative and illiberal Islamists, with whom the EU does not engage in any form of dialogue or interaction.³⁷ For example, former EU High Representative Catherine Ashton distinguished between 'radical Salafists' and 'the more moderate Islamists',³⁸ while current High Representative Federica Mogherini repeated on several occasions that '[p]olitical Islam is a very broad classification: it can include democratic parties as well as radical movements'.³⁹ The EU has also been clear in stating its support for those actors that abide by democratic principles and respect the rule of law, human rights and gender equality,⁴⁰ thus reinforcing some 'red lines' for its engagement with Islamist parties.

The reframing process undergone by the EU's stance towards Islamist actors has thus come full circle since its tepid beginning following the 9/11 attacks and, more convincingly, in the wake of the Arab uprisings.

Conclusions: The Future of Engagement

The EU's response to the coming to power of Islamist political actors in the region has been the result of a revised framing of political Islam, centred on the category of moderation. This has further been underpinned by two additional levers, differentiation, on the one hand, and pragmatism, on the other. The former refers to the principle that represents the new norm in the EU's approach to the countries of the MENA region following the Arab uprisings, which has been enshrined in the new EU's strategy towards

³⁵ Kausch, *Plus ca Change*.

³⁶ Interview with EU official, Brussels, June 2014.

³⁷ Netterstrøm, 'The Islamists' Compromise in Tunisia'.

³⁸ Answer to E-008155/2012 given by High Representative/Vice President Ashton on behalf of the Commission. Brussels, 20 November 2012.

³⁹ Answer to E-003641/16 given by Vice President Mogherini on behalf of the Commission, Brussels, 20 October 2016. See also Answer to E-011771/2015 given by High Representative/Vice President Mogherini, Brussels, 29 October 2015.

⁴⁰ See for example, Council of the European Union, Press release, 3124th Council Meeting, Brussels, 14 November 2011; Answer to E-002079/2011 given by the High Representative/Vice President Ashton on behalf of the Commission, Brussels, 12 May 2011; Statement by President Barroso following his meeting with Mr Mohamed Morsi, President of Egypt, 13 September 2012.

the region. This principle has made its way into, and has shaped, the EU's engagement with the Islamist actors (or lack thereof) in a mutually reinforcing dynamic that has further increased the distance across and within countries in terms of the actors, groups or individuals, policy sectors and initiatives the EU is keen on engaging with and actively supporting. The case of the EU's engagement with Ennahda is to some extent a product of this differentiation. However, the more forthcoming approach towards Islamist parties and the more systematic engagement with the moderate strands across the region, as displayed in the case of Ennahda, did not amount to a U-turn in the EU's stance. This was indeed dictated by a significant dose of pragmatism and continuity, and is as such easily reversible when confronted by a different set of domestic and regional circumstances, as the Egyptian case demonstrates.

Pragmatism can indeed be regarded as the driving force behind the EU's behaviour vis-à-vis Ennahda and other moderate Islamist parties against the backdrop of a more nuanced appreciation of changing domestic political contexts and thus of the EU's interests. The reframing process undergone by the EU's stance towards Islamist actors has provided new meaning to the concept of pragmatism that has tended to characterise the EU's stance towards the region since 2011. The need to ensure the success of the Tunisian democratic transition by defending it against the spread of violent radicalisation and terrorism has been a key consideration prompting the EU to engage pragmatically with Ennahda on the basis of its increasingly moderate – and equally pragmatic – stances. As such, pragmatism has also been enshrined in the new EU Global Strategy, unveiled in June 2016, as one of the key principles guiding its external relations. In light of its flexible nature, the concept and practice of pragmatism can easily be used to describe very different situations.

The cases of the Tunisian and the Egyptian Islamist parties are in point here and diverge substantially. In Egypt, the failure of the Muslim Brotherhood to create an inclusive system of government and their violent ousting by the military-backed leadership in mid-2013 have led to a partial freezing of the EU's engagement with the Islamists there and to its continued cooperation with the incumbent military regime because of security preoccupations. In contrast, the set of relations established between Ennahda and the EU have yielded positive results in the context of Tunisia's democratising trend and have further encouraged the EU to continue along its path of normalising relations with the Islamists, not viewing them as a threat to its identity, but rather as a necessary partner to ensure the stability of the country.

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