

Introduction:

The election of the first democratic president since independence marks the end of the turbulent Tunisian transition, marred by increasing political polarisation and deteriorating socioeconomic conditions (Hinds 2014). Since the demise of the long-standing authoritarian regime led by Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, rising organised violence has negatively affected the country’s political climate and domestic security.

Over the last two years, Tunisia has witnessed an intensification of attacks against members of political parties and of security forces (see Figure 1), while external observers have criticised the government for the mismanagement of the transition (Hachemaoui 2013; Ghorbal 2014). These trends present a serious challenge to the country’s political elite, which in the medium- and long-term may hinder the consolidation of inclusive and legitimate democratic institutions (Stepan 2012).

The paper is divided into four main parts. The first section overviews existing theories of Islamist violence, and con-

siders their applicability to the Tunisian case. The second section presents a model of protest cycles, explaining its internal processes and mechanisms.

In the third section, the paper first lays out the dynamics of the protest cycle in post-revolutionary Tunisia, by tracing the levels of violent conflict, its evolution over time and the main conflict actors involved. The analysis of political conflict in Tunisia relies on data collected by the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), which constitutes the most comprehensive dataset on political violence in African countries (Raleigh *et al.* 2010).

Furthermore, I test the validity of the protest cycle model on the Tunisian case, analysing how the patterns of conflict evolved over time and why they increasingly involved violent Islamist groups. In the final section, I draw some tentative conclusions concerning political violence in Tunisia based on the possible evolution of the conflict cycle.

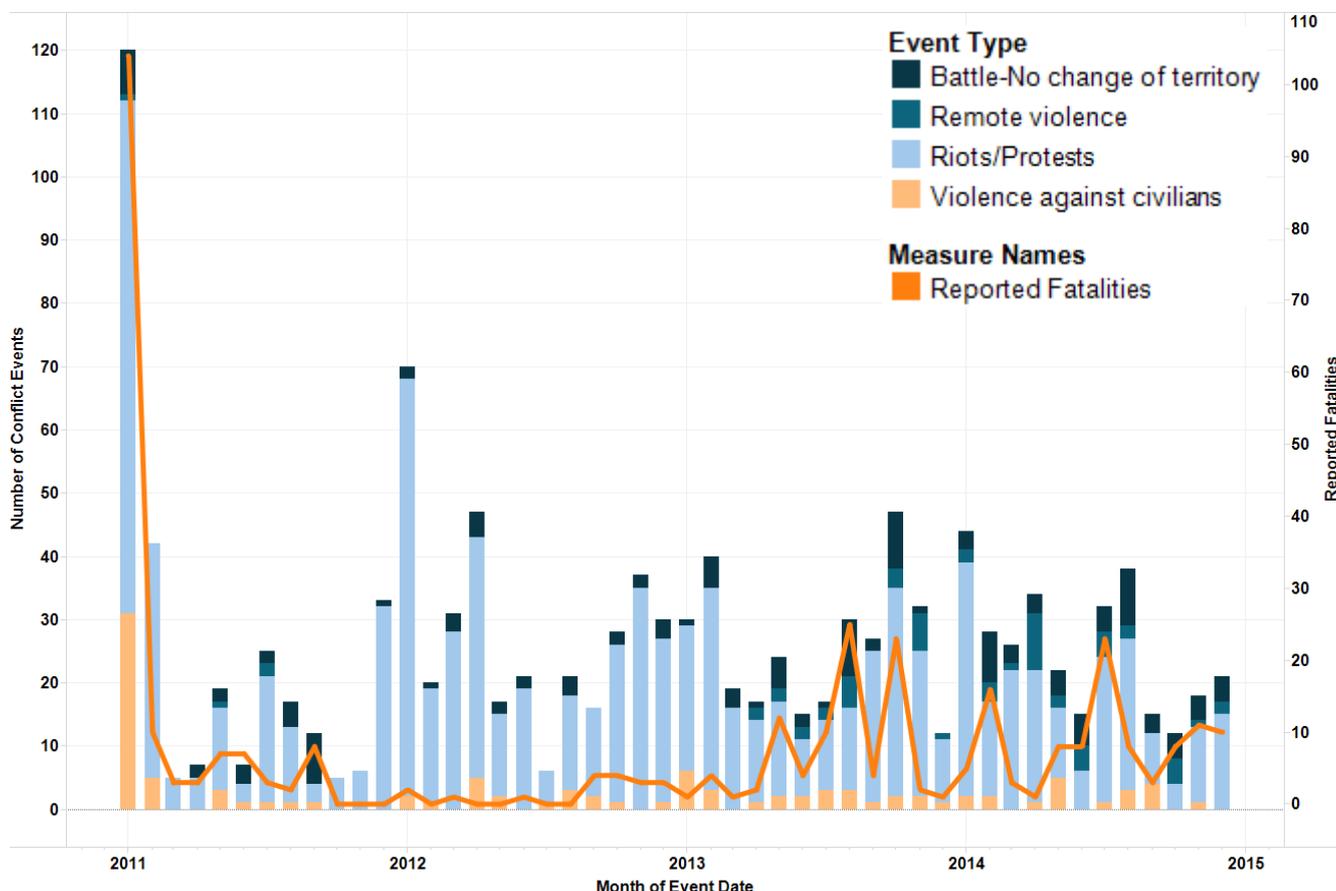


Figure 1: Conflict Event Levels and Reported Fatalities, Tunisia, by Month, 2011-2014.

Islamist Violence in Tunisia:

One of the most important political actors who have emerged in post-revolutionary Tunisia are Islamists. For the purposes of this paper, ‘Islamist’ refers to groups that aim at promoting a political and/or social order based on Islamic principles (Esposito 2003: 151; Nasr 2005: 13). Under the authoritarian regimes of Habib Bourguiba (1957 – 1987) and Ben Ali (1987 – 2011), religious parties were banned from political competition and many of their leaders imprisoned or exiled, while secularist policies restricted the public expression of religion. Following the end of the authoritarian regime, both moderate and radical Islamists could profit from the opening up of the political space (Kausch 2012; Wolf 2013).

Ennahda,* a moderate Islamist party officially committed to democratic institutions, was eventually legalised in March 2011 and a few months later, in October, won 89 out of 217 seats in the elections for the National Constituent Assembly (NCA), outnumbering all the other parties in the legislature. Salafist groups, who advocate a literal interpretation of the Quran and that had been repressed under Ben Ali, could also engage in preaching activities in the public space.

Emerging in Tunisia during the 1980s in opposition to moderate Islamists, Salafists are far from constituting a homogenous political entity (Wictorowicz 2006; Torelli *et al.* 2012). While some trends in the Salafist movement primarily engage in propaganda (*dawa*) or political activism, a *jihadi* current of Salafism has resorted to violence for political motivations. The rise of militant versions of Islamism in Tunisia has represented a major concern during the transition.

Over the course of the last two years, militant Islamist groups were held responsible for sporadic violent raids on public institutions and security forces as well as for the assassination of prominent political leaders. In June 2012, “ultraconservative Salafist students” assaulted the dean of Manouba University (Daley 2012); in the same month, thousands of militant Salafists stormed an arts exhibition

in La Marsa, injuring 65 policemen (Amara and Noueihed 2012); in September, an attack against the US embassy resulted in 4 deaths and dozens of injuries (Reuters 2012). Violence escalated significantly following the murders of Chokri Belaïd and Mohammed Brahmi, two secular politicians who were assassinated in February and July of 2013 respectively (Najjar 2014). The two killings unleashed a major political crisis that led to PM Hamadi Jebali’s resignation in March and to an institutional stalemate later in July.

Since 2013, Islamist militias have increasingly carried out armed attacks against military forces, inflicting heavy losses on soldiers and national guards: in July 2014, fourteen soldiers died from a militant Islamist offensive in the

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mountainous area of Jebel Chaambi near Kasserine, inflicting the deadliest attack on military units since 1960s (Arfaoui and Yahia 2014); in late November, a National Guard agent was kidnapped and beheaded near the town of Kef; a few days later, one soldier was killed in a landmine explosion in the heights of Kasserine (*France24* 2014).

In addition, although only a minority of the population expresses support for ISIS according to recent estimates (Kirkpatrick 2014), nearly 3000 Tunisians have allegedly become combatants in Syria, more than any other single country has contributed thus far (*The Economist* 2014).** Taken together,

these episodes point to an escalation of political conflict, on whose causes policy-makers and analysts alike have proposed alternative explanations.

Some scholars and secular parties have blamed Ennahda and its allies in power for an allegedly tolerant approach *vis-à-vis* violent groups, including the Leagues for the Protection of the Revolution (LPR) and Salafist militias (Hachemaoui 2013; Marks 2014). According to these arguments, prominent members of the Islamist party, which had enjoyed a vast parliamentary majority since October 2011, Ennahda treated Salafists as “wayward children with a well-intentioned but simplistic view of reli-

* Some authors have questioned the Islamist nature of Ennahda, seeing its current ideology closer to a mainstream conservative party than to a radical Islamist one (Cavatorta and Merone 2013).

** According to the International Center for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence, Tunisia is the single country that has contributed the most in terms of foreign fighters joining rebels in Syria. Nevertheless, recent figures show that foreign combatants coming from European countries have increased significantly (Sharma 2015).

gion” (Jacobs 2013). Moreover, tactical considerations allegedly prevented the Islamist party from taking a tougher stance against radicals at its own risk for fear of losing the electoral base. Rather than fully integrating Salafists in the democratic polity, Ennahda’s ambiguous position has ended up with some smaller groups resorting to violent means. The ideological affinity between Ennahda and the Salafists, together with accusations of “doublespeak” against the ruling party (Sayare 2011), have meant many analysts hold political Islamists responsible for the escalation of violence (Hachemaoui 2013: 22-25, Gobe and Chouika 2013: 179-180).

Other analyses of the escalating violence in Tunisia stress the importance of marginalisation and exclusion among the youth as determining factors in the emergence of violent militant groups during the transition. It is argued that young people, dissatisfied with mainstream politics, have turned to radical anti-system movements. Class cleavages, rather than ideological or religious divisions, are far more decisive in fostering mobilisation. If, according to this argument, Ennahda is responsible for the emergence of violence, these are not related to the lax attitude towards Salafists, but to economic policies that did not adequately address youth unemployment and social exclusion in peripheral areas of the country (Marks 2013; Merone 2015).

Despite shedding light on important political dynamics, these two sets of arguments do not explain how Islamist violence has emerged, and what its relationship to previous conflict in the country is. While the former argument overrates the authoritarian instincts in Ennahda and its affinity with ultraconservatives, the latter one does not explain how social and economic inequalities transformed into actual violent conflict. Additionally, theories that seek to explain Islamist violence by establishing a causal link between specific religious identities and violent conflict have been refuted as empirically inaccurate (Huntington 1996; Lewis 2003).

Echoed in the public discourse by leading intellectuals and policy-makers, these culturalist views continue to influence the understanding of the relationship between violence and religious identity. However, several studies

(Chiozza 2002; Dowd 2015) have shown how there is no empirical evidence for the claim that some religious identities – namely Islam – are more prone to violence than others. While religious identity may provide a strong, cohesive collective identity, the processes through which violent conflict emerges are much more nuanced than what the “clash of civilisations” and related theses hold.

Some analyses have blamed Ennahda and its allies in power for an allegedly tolerant approach towards violent Islamist groups; while others emphasise the role of marginalisation and exclusion among the youth.

This paper offers an explanation based in the evolution of the cycle of protest in Tunisia between 2011 and 2014, and seeks to explain the rise of violence as the result of a competition process within the Islamist movement.

The alternative model I propose is based on the evolution of the cycle of protest in Tunisia between 2011 and 2014. This approach seeks to explain the rise of violence in post-revolutionary Tunisia as the result of a competition process within the Islamist movement. Building upon a model of protest cycle in Italy in late 1960s and early 1970s (Della Porta and Tarrow 1986), I argue that concurrent processes of demobilisation and radicalisation characterised the cycle of conflict in post-revolutionary Tunisia.

Radicalisation has primarily involved Islamist movements, as the militant groups that mushroomed after the revolution were able to gain greater visibility and expand their ranks. As several studies have shown, social movements and collective action in North Africa and in the rest of the continent have thus far been barely explored systematically (Brandes and Engels 2011; De Waal and Ibreck 2013; Lodge 2013). The aim of this work is to present a systematic analysis of social movements in North African countries that would include both religious- and non-religious-oriented collective actors after the Arab uprisings.

An Analytical Model of Protest Cycles

The emergence of political violence has been variously explained in academic literature. Scholars have alternatively resorted to structural theories that explain conflict in terms of social, economic or political macro-variables (Gurr 1970; Sambanis 2001) or to conjunctural ones that highlight the role of specific and historically-circumscribed societal configurations (Huntington 1968; Kaldor 2001). While these narratives may help define the socio-political or cultural context where conflict arises, they fall short of explaining how the structural or specific configurations of a particular society can translate into actual mobilisation (Della Porta and Tarrow 1986: 608).

In response to the perceived shortcomings of the macro-structural and the conjunctural literature, other scholars have focused on the processes of conflict escalation and the dynamics of contention. Based on the examination of historical case studies, this process-oriented analytical framework has sought to explain the emergence of violent conflict in terms of protest cycles, political opportunity structure, resource mobilisation and cultural processes of framing alignment (Della Porta 2008). All these contributions have merged into the study of *contentious politics*, which brings together the dimensions of contention, collective action and politics (Tilly and Tarrow 2007: 4)

In order to analyse the escalation of conflict in Tunisia, I will make use of a protest cycle model. Academic studies on social movements define protest cycles as “periods of increased protest activity involving one or more issues and many protesting groups” (Della Porta 2008: 222). According to Della Porta and Tarrow (1986: 610), a cycle of protest is constituted by five core elements. First, the *level of peaceful and violent conflict* in the protest cycle is noticeably higher if compared to the average levels of periods of contained conflict. Second, conflict spreads to *different professional sectors and geographic locations*, involving a variety of social categories.

Third, *new conflict actors* appear and older ones resort to *new forms of claim-making and collective action*. Fourth, social actors develop *new grievances and claims*, resorting to innovative ideological frames. Fifth, conflict behaviour triggers a *political reaction* in response, determining an

interaction between institutional and conflict actors. It differs from other models in emphasising the internal dynamics of contention as the crucial element for the emergence of violence within a cycle of protest. The model was first conceived to analyse conflict escalation in Italy in 1965-1975 (Della Porta and Tarrow 1987; Tarrow 1989) and later applied to the 1989 protest cycle in the German Democratic Republic (Mueller 1999) and to the rise of the Niger Delta People’s Volunteer Force (NDPVF) in Nigeria (Hazen 2009).

In the model developed by Della Porta and Tarrow, the protest cycle is composed of different phases. At the beginning of the cycle, a wave of mass protest arises, with protesting groups that resort to traditional repertoires of

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This model is helpful in understanding the dynamics of escalation in post-revolutionary Tunisia.

action in their claim-making activity (for instance, a combination of street marches, sit-ins and public gatherings). Surprised by the emergence of unrest, social and political elites are divided over how to engage with protesters. Furthermore, since the composition of the demonstrations is mixed in a climate of mass mobilisation and open access to the protests, police repression tends to be ineffective, generating further outrage and leading other actors to join the contestation.

While protests grow and new actors take part in the uprising, Della Porta and Tarrow note that “a process of competitive tactical differentiation begins” (1986: 611). In an attempt to

expand their social base and progressively differentiate themselves from other groups taking part in the protests, social movements develop new forms of collective action and claims. As these forms of collective action take over the older ones and elites adapt to the new context, innovative repertoires of contention emerge. Smaller or younger political organisations may thus resort to confrontational forms of action in order to distance themselves from other competitors in the social movement sector and gain greater visibility.

At this stage, in which fluidity permeates the protest movement and the public pressure to stop turmoil is mounting, police reaction is likely to be misdirected, as they respond to disruptive action with non-targeted violence. Pierskalla, among others, has shown under which conditions the government may be more inclined to resort to repression successfully to crash or deter protests (Pierskalla 2010). However, he notes that repression may

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in fact fuel escalation of violent tactics, especially if the government is weak or supported by hardliner third parties (e.g., the military or radical factions).

Lastly, some factions in the institutionalised sector, including political parties, trade unions and various interest groups, may be tempted to co-opt the demands and the tactics of the new actors, mitigating the most disruptive forms of action. In this climate, increased competition within the social movement sector will give the small conflictual actors more incentives to resort to violence, intensifying the process of strategic differentiation. As the forms of action become more radical and disruptive, a smaller segment of the protesters jump into these more aggressive groups, while the less militant either join the most traditional movements or demobilise and leave the social movement sector altogether.

The emergence of violence thus precedes the beginning of the decline of the social movement. As new violent actors emerge and police repression becomes more severe, the number of people willing to join protests decreases. Paradoxically, while the escalation of the protests generates the impression of a general upheaval out of control, the emergence of violence leads to a decline in general support for the protests and encourage defections from the movement.

Hence, the intensification of conflict events replaces the mass mobilisation that characterised the first phase of the protests, despite decreasing levels of participation and partial demobilisation. The appearance of groups willing to use violence results in increasing polarisation of the social movement sector and in a more repressive attitude

on the part of police and security forces. In turn, the government may decide to ban these movements or declare them ‘terrorists’, thus shifting contention from *contained* to *transgressive* (Tilly and Tarrow 2007: 60). These elements and phases are summarised in Table 1.

Della Porta and Tarrow’s model implies that the emergence of violence and demobilisation and are two distinct yet parallel processes, which consolidate as the cycle of protest evolves and declines. Violence results from an endemic competition within the social movement sector, preceding and fostering the decline of the protest cycle (Hazen 2009: 287). Repression affects both mobilisation and the emergence of violence: it accelerates the former process as ordinary people refuse to engage in violent protest, while it isolates and invigorates the most aggressive

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	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3
Repertoires of action	Traditional Mostly peaceful	Innovative Appearance of violent events	Disruptive
Participation	Mass protests	Mass protests New conflict actors, sometimes violent	Smaller groups
Police repression	Ineffective	Non-targeted and misguided	Severe, anti-terrorist tactics
Dominant mechanisms	Active mobilisation	Mobilisation Competitive tactical differentiation	Partial demobilisation, institutionalisation, defection

Table 1: A Model of Protest Cycles. Based on Della Porta and Tarrow (1986: 610-613).

The Cycle of Protest in Post-Revolutionary Tunisia and the Emergence of Islamist Violence

I now turn to describing the evolution of the protest cycle in post-revolutionary Tunisia, from the fall of the authoritarian regime led by Ben Ali on January 15, 2011 to the two rounds of presidential and parliamentary elections that concluded in December 2014. Hence, my analysis excludes the uprising that brought the old regime down and focuses entirely on the protest cycle that followed. This has been done in order to isolate the impact of the political system on the repertoires used by conflict actors (Hazen 2009: 60-61). Non-democratic regimes usually provide fewer arenas of claim-making and limited opportunities to influence the political process.

As authoritarian political systems tolerate a lower degree of contention and resort easily to repression, protests unfold largely in transgressive - and violent - forms. By

contrast, the onset of a transition opens up the political space and creates new opportunities for actors to engage in political protest, either within or outside the institutional system (Hazen 2009: 283-284). As I consider the transition a major breakthrough for the Tunisian political system, the analysis of the protest cycle begins as from January 15, 2011.

The uprisings that occurred in Tunisia between December 2010 and January 2011 constituted an unprecedented event in the country's history. Never before had a wave of unrest overthrown the regime, nor had the Tunisian authorities expected that such an uprising could escalate so quickly (*Al Arabiya* 2010). It also marked the end of the exclusion of Islamist forces from politics, as the moderate Islamist party Ennahda was legalised in March and was allowed to run in the first free elections in October. The more conservative Salafists also benefitted from the end of Ben Ali's secularist regime, as they started to freely engage in preaching activities in the public space.

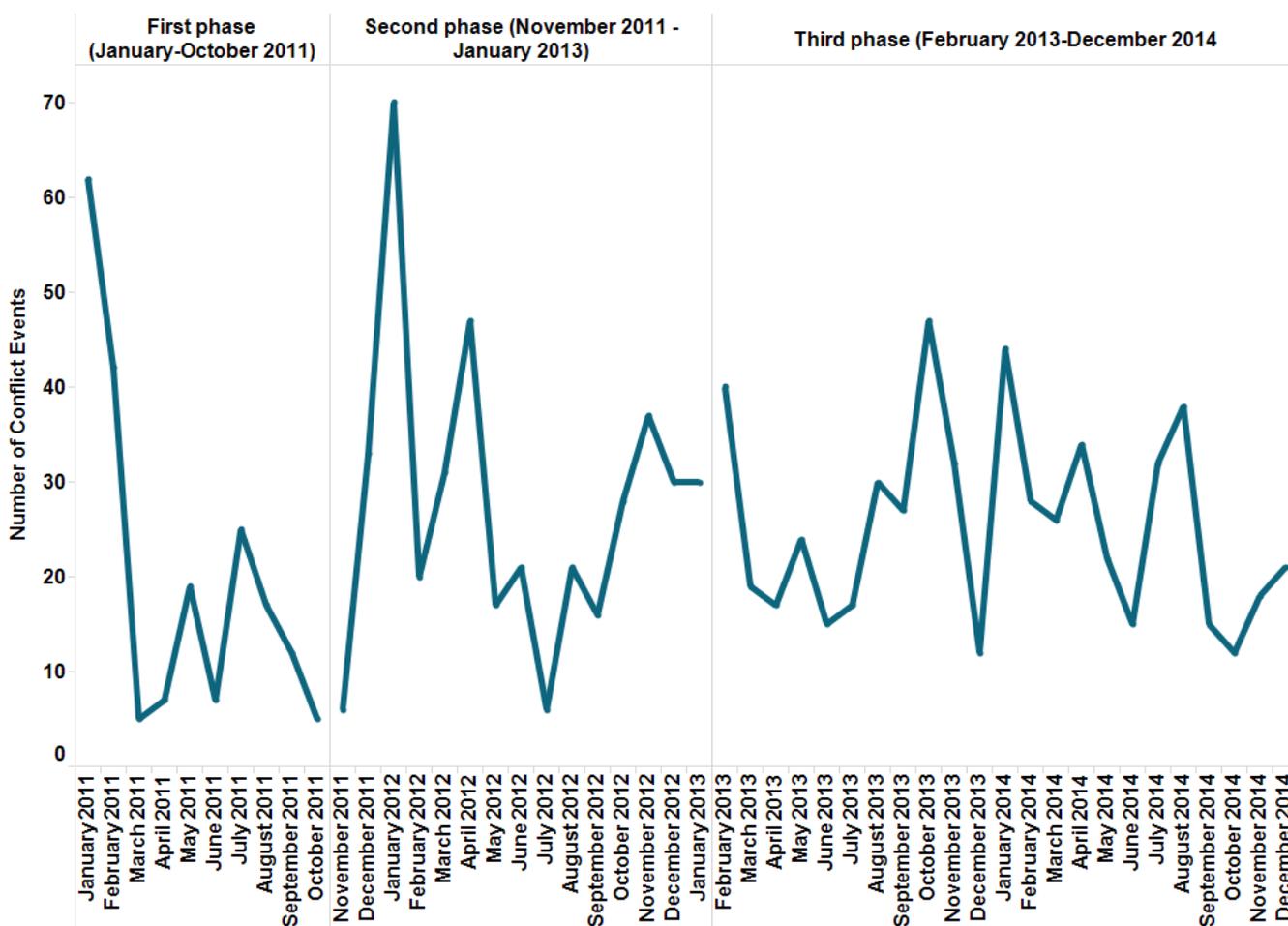


Figure 2: Number of Conflict Events in Tunisia, by Phase, January 2011– December 2014.

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The first step needed to analyse the evolution of the protest cycle is to single out what can be considered as a protest event. ACLED collects reported information about all episodes of political violence on the African continent. In this dataset, political violence is defined as “the use of force by a group with a political purpose or motivation”, thus excluding all economically- or criminally-motivated conflict events (Raleigh and Dowd 2015: 7). Since the focus of the paper is on the political dynamics of a protest cycle, ACLED is well-suited to provide a thorough quantitative analysis of the process under scrutiny.

Figure 2 distinguishes three main periods in the protest cycle in post-revolutionary Tunisia. The first phase is from Ben Ali’s downfall and flight to Saudi Arabia in January 2011 to October in the same year, when Tunisia held the elections of the NCA. The second phase of the protest cycle is from November 2011, in the midst of the negotiations to form the new government, to the end of January 2013, on the eve of a major political crisis that followed the assassination of party leader Chokri Belaïd and that led PM Hamadi Jebali to resign. The third and last phase covers the *interim* governments of Ali Laarayedh and Mehdi Jomaa and the recent rounds of parliamentary and presidential elections.

As soon as the revolutionary wave winds down and the transition unfolds,* the number of conflict events markedly decreases from the levels of the uprising, with regular upswings in May and July and downswings in June and in autumn. The initial stages of the protest cycle are characterised by the use of traditional forms of claim-making and a more intense activity of relatively institutionalised forces, such as trade unions (the UGTT, *Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail*, had been crucial in the preparation of the revolts against Ben Ali) and political parties running in the forthcoming October elections.

In particular, Ennahda played a pivotal role (Stepan and Linz 2013). The emergence of a moderate Islamist party committed to democratic institutions was seen as a decisive breakthrough with the authoritarian past. Thanks to its long history of moderation, Ennahda could present itself as a reassuringly conservative and religious-oriented force (Cavatorta and Merone 2013). Ennahda exerted a strong appeal among the middle classes, as the disproportional representation of political and business elites, professionals and academics within the party’s establishment

seems to suggest (Santilli 2013). This elitist, middle-class connotation of political parties, together with worsening economic conditions, fostered a gradual separation of the so-called disenfranchised youth (the *muhammashin*) from traditional politics.

The number of conflict events increases starting from March and, even more significantly, from the immediate aftermath of the elections of the NCA in October. In fact, while the institution tasked with the drafting of electoral rules (‘High Authority for the Realisation of the Objectives of the Revolution, for Political Reforms and Democratic Transition’, otherwise known as ‘High Authority’) was largely accepted by Tunisians, popular mobilisation became “gradually more linked to specific economic and social demands, later to be followed by mobilizations that made identity a central concern” (Zemni 2014: 9).

During the second phase of the protest cycle, the number of conflict events increased on average compared to the levels of the previous period, with sporadic peaks and significant periodic variations. Figure 3 highlights the evolution of contention in the course of the protest cycle. In the period under consideration, the vast majority of conflict events include riots and protests. However, while the rate of violent rioting remains stable throughout the cycle (around 20%), the incidence of non-violent protesting on total conflict events changes significantly. Protests account for 55% and 67% of total conflict events in the first and the second phase of the cycle, decreasing up to 48% in the last interval. Despite sporadic clashes between organised armed groups and episodes of violence against civilians, political conflict thus remains predominantly non-violent until January 2013.

As noted earlier, the surge in the number of conflict events becomes increasingly linked to the deterioration of the country’s socio-economic situation, grappling with rampaging unemployment rates, regional inequalities and corruption (ICG 2013; Khandelwal and Roitman 2013). Growing disillusionment with mainstream parties – especially Ennahda – fuelled the ranks of radical groups in various parts of the country. A plethora of young and smaller groups thus engaged in conflict, sporadically resorting to violent forms of action in order to distance themselves from more traditional movements. The attacks on the Manouba University, the art exhibition in La Marsa and the American embassy in Tunis were instrumental in re-

* After Ben Ali’s departure, the speaker of the Parliament Fouad Mebazaa assumed the interim presidency, while Mohammed Ghannouchi retained his post as Prime Minister. The attempt to dissolve the chambers and postpone the elections sparked a new wave of protests launched by opposition forces in early February. Ghannouchi had to step down on February 27th, after hundreds of thousands of demonstrators crowded in Tunis to demand his resignation and the dissolution of the Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD, the party linked to Ben Ali’s regime). His successor, the long-standing politician and diplomat Beji Caid Essebsi, gave up the idea of a top-down transition and set to involve opposition forces.

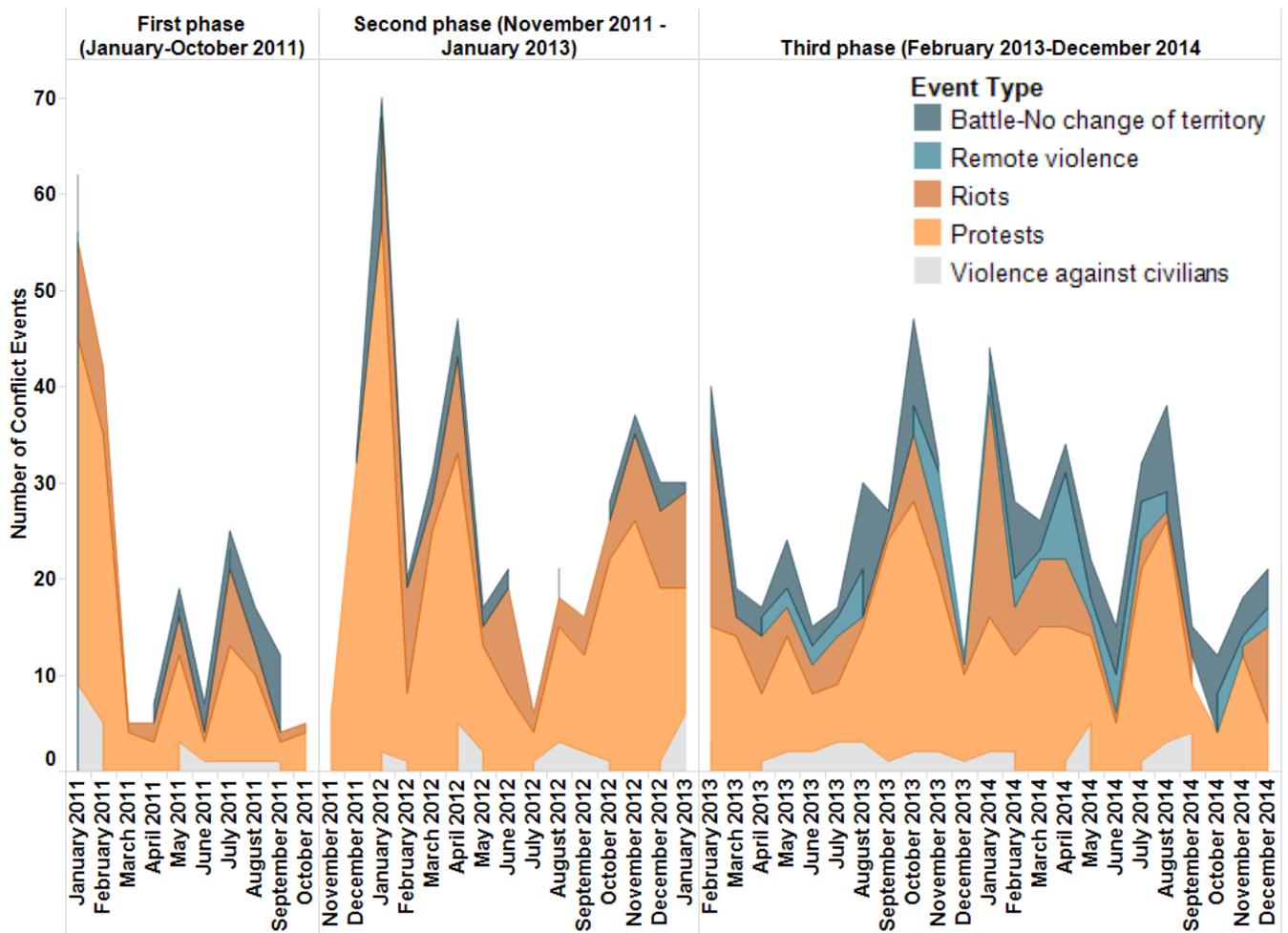


Figure 3: Number of Conflict Events by Type in Tunisia, by Phase, January 2011-December 2014.

stating their anti-system nature and achieving greater visibility in the public space. Rather than suggesting that there is a direct link between poverty and radicalisation, there is evidence that Salafist communities were particularly successful in attracting followers in the peripheral regions of the country (Marks 2013: 569).

Therefore, as the Islamists in government became progressively institutionalised and appeared incapable of solving the country's chronic problems, new radical actors turned to disruptive repertoires of conflict. Between November 2011 and January 2013, a climate of general mobilisation coexisted with the emergence of sporadic violent incidences. This confirms the model's assumption that, as new groups crowd in the protest cycle, innovation of conflict repertoires and competitive tactical differentiation among social actors tend to occur.

Conflict patterns evolve further in the third phase. While the total number of conflict events remains high, especially between October 2013 and April 2014, the protest cycle shows a significant qualitative evolution. Not only do protests constitute less than half of overall conflict events, battles between armed groups and remote violence also begin to occur on a more regular basis, accounting for one quarter of overall events. The decline of non-violent protesting and the increased regularity and incidence of organised violence, in contrast with the violence perpetrated by spontaneous groupings of demonstrators, points to an escalation of the cycle.

In particular, the rise of organised violence in the third phase coincides with the heightened activity of militant Islamists. Figure 4 shows all conflict events attributed to Islamist actors in ACLED.* It shows that the participation

* Please note that Islamist actors may have been participants in other conflict events, but not coded as the primary actor. This may be the case of riots where Islamist groups were active in riots alongside other organised groups or in armed clashes where the identity of the militant group(s) was not identified.

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of conflict actors with an Islamist/Salafist connotation in the protest cycle tended to grow and evolve over time. Especially in the second phase, Islamist groups engage mainly in riots and protests. By contrast, the third phase sees a sharp increase in the levels of organised violence (battles and remote IED attacks) attributed to Islamist armed groups. These militant formations, listed in Table II, at the end of this report, were mostly active in the capital region and in the west of the country, and perpetrated several attacks against foreign embassies, members of the political elite and state forces.

Repression of political conflict became heavier in 2013, fuelling further radicalisation of conflict tactics. In the first half of the year, the Ennahda-led cabinet had adopted a more repressive policy vis à vis terrorist groups. In particular, the assassination of Chokri Belaïd, leader of the left-secular Democratic Patriots' Movement in February 2013, and Mohamed Brahmi, member of the NCA for the People's Movement, prompted a harsh response of the executive. In August, PM Ali Laarayedh announced that Ansar al-Sharia, a Salafist group that emerged after the 2011 revolution, had been declared a terrorist organisation

(BBC 2013). Laarayedh justified the decision by asserting a direct link between the assassination of Belaïd and Brahmi and with jihadist cells active in the Mount Chaambi area in Western Tunisia. However, the government's repressive approach against militia activity inflamed further radicalisation, as radical groups may more likely resort to violence when there is little or no room for bargaining.

Hence, in the third phase of the cycle, the process of strategic differentiation among conflict actors reaches its peak. The protest cycle escalates, feeding defections and demobilisation. Unrest appears out of control, as violent forms of conflict intensify and occur on a more regular basis. Furthermore, escalating conflict patterns foster the isolation of the most radical groups. As the map in Figure 5 shows, militant Islamists were particularly active in the capital's region and in Western Tunisia, near the Algerian border. In these areas, *jihadi* Salafists have taken control of smuggling routes and allied with local organised crime, a recent development that may indicate the attempt to establish more effective channels for financing and weapons smuggling (ICG 2014).

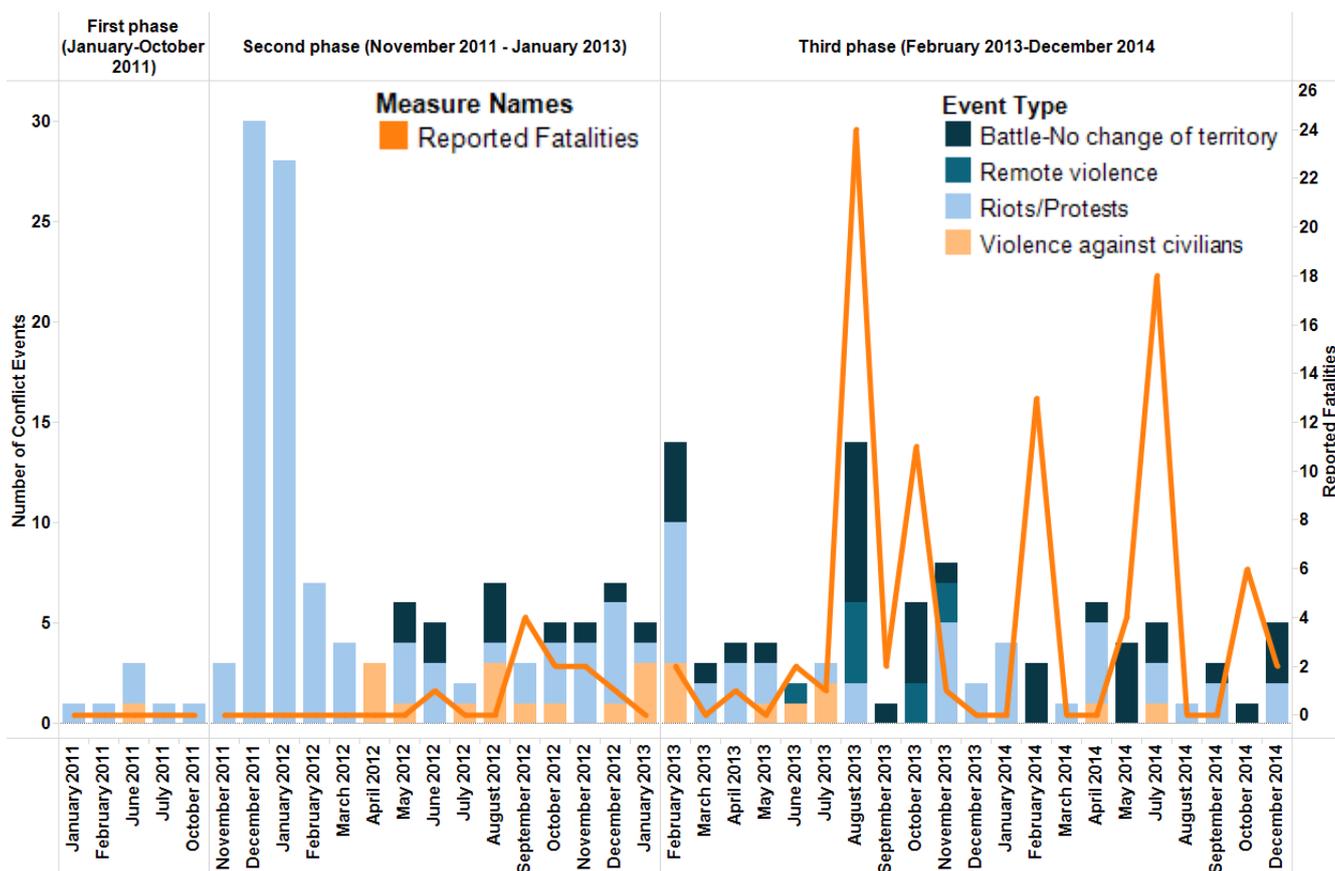


Figure 4: Number of Conflict Events involving Islamist Actors by Type, Tunisia, January 2011-December 2014.

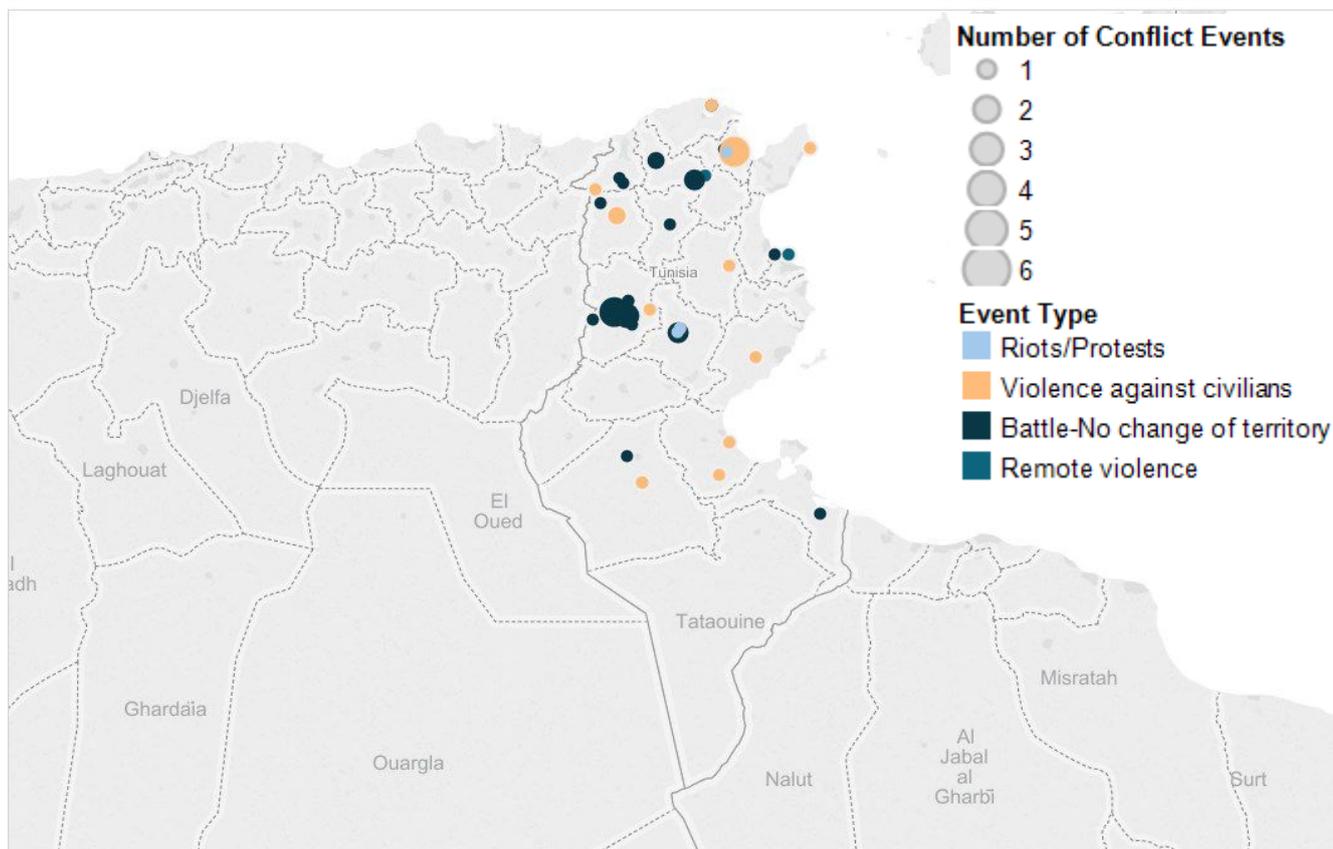


Figure 5: Number of Battles involving Islamist Militias by Location and Type in Tunisia, January 2011–December 2014.

Social movement studies have long tried to explain why collective actors resort to either violent or non-violent tactics (Olson 1965; Tilly and Tarrow 2007; Pierskalla 2010). As shown for the Tunisian case, non-violent mobilisation remained high throughout the first and most unstable phase of the transition. This may be explained by the fact that the rising democratic institutions could embody a crucial breakthrough with the past, both in terms of political and socio-economic demands.

The relative decline of non-violent mobilisation – and the simultaneous rise of violent armed groups – during the second and the third phase of the cycle coincided with the failure of the governing coalition in tackling the most pressing socio-economic grievances and the growing disillusionment over traditional political parties. While it is not inevitable that the onset of a democratic transition defuses mass non-violent collective action whilst increasing the likelihood of violent mobilisation, the perceived mismatch between the demands of the protesters and the achievements of the government was instrumental in distancing an increasing number of protesters from the traditional repertoires of action.

The Prospects of Tunisia’s Conflict Cycle

These recent conflict trends witnessed in Tunisia conform with the model of protest cycles described in the previous section. Della Porta and Tarrow assumed that a tendency for disruptive behaviour emerges in times of partial demobilisation, that is to say, when mass protests are less frequent and continue to rely on traditional repertoires, such as strikes, marches or sit-ins. In other words, they argue, partial demobilisation and radicalisation feed upon one another. During these phases, a process of tactical differentiation occurs among conflict actors, as insurgents willing to continue the protests look for more confrontational repertoires and become more aggressive, whereas more moderate participants either resort to more peaceful forms of protest, enter into politics or leave the social movement sector.

The analysis of the conflict cycle in post-revolutionary Tunisia can lead to some tentative conclusions. The adoption of violent repertoires is the result of a competitive tactical differentiation between different political and social groups in the Islamist camp. At the same time, the rise of militia violence goes hand in hand with a decline in non

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-violent protesting activity, which accounted for the vast majority of conflict events until January 2013. As the protest cycle wended down, mass non-violent protesting was replaced by a more confrontational approach adopted by militant groups. This means that violence rose later during the cycle, reflecting a gradual escalation of the conflict cycle.

As a result, the increased expressive capacity of militant groups was instrumental in escalating the conflict cycle. On the one hand, it strengthened the collective identity of such groups, increasing their ability to mobilise militants in marginalised areas of the country. Disillusioned by traditional politics, these groups have provided a cohesive ideological framework for collective action. On the other hand, the adoption of a more repressive stance by the government ended up with further radicalising armed militias, as it reduced the likelihood of a negotiated situation. Facing the sole prospect of violent state repression, violent Islamist groups resorted to militia activity, seeking out clashes with governmental forces, external actors or political rivals. Referring to the spiral of violence in Italy in the 1960s and 1970s, Della Porta and Tarrow noted that “the elevated costs paid in violent tactics discourage participation among the weakened, the pragmatic and the moderate, while at the same time increasing the sense of solidarity among people who have faced state repression and violent enemies together.” (1986: 628). With the due differences given diverse political and social contexts, these words may well apply to the protest cycle in Tunisia between 2011 and 2014.

Further work should focus on understanding the process of demobilisation and to what extent the Tunisian case

differs from other regional examples. Research on this topic may thus explore the impacts of elevated costs on non-violent collective action and how this has influenced the strategic choices adopted by conflict actors. Additionally, future research may also provide fresh insights on how non-violent collective discontent translate into armed conflict and violent armed groups emerge thus escalating the conflict cycle. Analysis on the social context and the motivations of militants is due to better understand whether violent actors are old groups ‘ramping up’ their intensity or new groups emerging in the face of police repression.

What should we expect from the evolution of the conflict cycle in Tunisia? First, organised violence is set to increase. Militia activity and military repression may continue to affect the domestic patterns of conflict, inflating a spiral of violence that has escalated significantly since 2013. Second, the persistence of the dire socio-economic situation may fuel further disillusionment with the traditional political elites. The turnout at the recent elections was exceptionally lower among the young population and in the inner areas of the country, suggesting that anti-system radical groups may increase their reach (Marks 2014; Verghese 2014). Furthermore, the continuation of political crises at Tunisia’s borders is likely to influence the domestic conflict trends. Although it cannot be said that the protest cycle is over, the evolution of conflict patterns has thus far been in line with the assumptions of Della Porta and Tarrow’s model.

Actor Name	Number of Conflict Events
Ansar al-Sharia	9
AQIM: Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb	3
CPR: Committees for the Protection of the Revolution	1
Ennahda Political Party	2
Islamist Militia (Tunisia)	24
Okba Ibn Nafaa Brigade	3
Salafist Militia (Tunisia)	38

Table II: List of Islamist Militant Groups Active in Tunisia, January 2011-December 2014.

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