**SeSaMO**

**SOCIETÀ PER GLI STUDI SUL MEDIO ORIENTE**

**TITOLO/TITLE**: The methodological challenges for a systematization of our knowledge about parties and party systems in the MENA region.

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**ABSTRACT (1500 parole/words)**:

When debating about the political crises that puzzle the MENA region, there is often a missing piece, that is political parties, which are indeed key – and sometimes controversial- political players. On the one hand, they are portent of democratization in as much as they contribute to integrate the masses into politics, but, at the same time, they are also crucial for the resilience of authoritarianism. On the other hand, beyond regional specificities, political parties in the MENA are not immune from the illnesses political parties worldwide are undergoing, namely the crisis of trust, reduced membership, populism and so on.

Despite the saliency of political parties in the region, the lack of data regarding their functioning, the ideological cleavages driving the political competition and their positioning on a variety of key political issues hampers any meaningful advancement in the comprehension of Arab politics, which otherwise will continue to be pinpointed to as characterized by immutable chaos. The present panel seeks to bring to the light new venues of research to overcome this gap.

Despite the poor democratic credentials of the MENA region, political parties are quintessential for the politics and the governance of the MENA (Hinnebusch 2021), where, despite some niches of clientelism and networks of kinship, ideology and programmatic competition play a crucial role in structuring party systems and parties' politicking. Yet, it is not yet clear along which dimensions political competition occurs and how party systems in the MENA region are structured.

The traditional comparative political science literature understands party politics in developed democracies as occurring within a left-right unidimensional space whose foundations have to do with the historical socio-economic experiences of the Western world. Parties' placement on this ideological continuum – which is important in order to understand the format of party systems and its consequences in terms of governability and policy making – depends on their positioning on social issues (e.g. abortion, LGBT+ rights and environment) and economic matters (e.g. the role of the state in economy). Even though this categorization presents some flaws in accounting for current politics, it is still the main working framework to understand party politics in many parts of the world.

However, when coming to the MENA region, the traditional left-right scheme (RILE) appears largely inapplicable in reason of the fact that the historical socio-economic experiences of the region differ from those of the Western world. Hence, the nature and the structure of party politics is a debated question.

In the MENA the RILE is deemed to be replaced by a religious-secular cleavage (Resta 2018). Some studies surmise that it conceals a divide between opponents (the Islamists) and supporter of the authoritarian status quo (which foment from the secularist side the Islam/secular divide) (Lust 2011), a centre-periphery rift (Yıldırım 2016), or a class divide (Merone 2015; Elsayyd and Hanafy 2014; Van Hamme, Gana and Maher 2014), and some others limit its scope to the role of religion in politics and gender issues (Wegner and Cavatorta 2018).

As for the tiers structuring political competition, in a recent study Aydogan (2020) has found that throughout the MENA the political space is two-dimensional (with the exception of Tunisia where it appeared to be three-dimensional) and that these dimensions are different depending on the country considered. For large part of the literature these can be conceived as a socio-economic left-right dimension and a 'moral' social liberal-conservative one (Abduljaber and Kalin 2019; Çarkoğlu, Krouwel and Yıldırım 2018). Even though this might appear similar to the RILE used for studying consolidated democracies, its employment would be misleading. First, some scholars contend that also the political reforms dimension is substantively important (Abduljaber 2020; Aydogan 2020). Second, it has emerged that many of the left-right political stances are significantly reversed in the MENA region (Aydogan 2020; Aydogan and Slapin 2010). Lastly, the political dimensions that

emerge as important to define the political space prove to be lowly inter-correlated thus demonstrating that the stemming ideological space has poor internal coherence (Abduljaber 2018).

The confusion that characterizes any endeavour at defining the nature of the political cleavage in the MENA region is at the base of the difficulties, and thereof the scarcity of attempts, in placing MENA parties on a political space (Resta 2019, 2022; Aydogan 2020) and, with, the possibility of having a first-hand idea of the party systems in the region.

The papers that will be presented and discussed in the panel are:

***Beyond Islamism and post-Islamism. Methodological Remarks on the Ennahda case for Exiting Political Islam.*** *Hamza Meddeb*
In 2016, the Islamist movement Ennahda announced its commitment to become a purely political party—rather than a movement engaged in religious proselytizing. This decision marked a radical change of strategy as it supposed a whole redefinition of the movement's identity. From a political perspective, Ennahda's decision to renounce to political Islam as its overall guiding framework had the potential to redraw lines of cleavages in Tunisia's political sphere. The redefinition of the movement's identity aimed also at rebuilding its support base on grounds other than religion and overcome a crisis of legitimacy after years of power exercise marked by compromise, pragmatism, and pure political opportunism. However, years after this decision, Ennahda has been struggling to rebrand itself. The power grab operated by President Kais Saied in July 2021 who suspended the parliament, dismissed the government, and abandoned the 2014 constitution which was the result of compromise between Islamist and secularist, ended up sidelining Ennahda and exacerbating tensions between conflictual visions and ambitions among its leaders. 5 years after announcing its transformation project, Ennahda seems to be lost in transition from Islamism to Post-Islamism, an even beyond. Indeed, the case of Ennahda brings us to question the uneasy exit from political Islam and the unsuccessful shift to post-Islamism. Ennahda transformation project is interesting as it challenges a series of paradigms that shape the study of Islamism in the MENA region. First, the inclusion/moderation paradigm is unable to grasp the complexity of this strategic decision. Unlike Morocco, Egypt, or Jordan where inclusion of Islamist movements was a result of a negotiated process with regimes and deep states that used to set the rules, Ennahda has been an active actor in reshaping Tunisia's political sphere since 2011 along with secular forces. As a result, the decision to end its Islamist project was a consequence of internal and external pressures, born out of pragmatism and transactional politics. Second, the post-Islamism paradigm according to which Islamist movements will downsize ideology and take an ethical turn in their attempt to renegotiate the place of Islam in their project seems unable to grasp the contradictions Ennahda has been struggling with. Prioritizing consensus seeking with Well entrenched interests has weakened Ennahda's image as a driver of socioeconomic change. More importantly, compromising with widely perceived or depicted "corrupted elites" has undermined Ennahda image of piety and probity. By governing in a coalition with old regime members, cronies and by acquiescing to neoliberal economic policies and covering corruption, Ennahda has lost its ability to activate anticorruption arguments and ethical values to rebuild its legitimacy and support base. Last, the Ennahda's challenge of moving forward with its transformation project brings to the table a wider methodological question which is how to study the "normalization" of Islamist movement, i.e., normal parties facing identity and political challenges.

***Reassessing the secular/religious divide in Turkish post 2013 political space.*** *Chiara Maritato*
The paper aims to investigate how Turkey's religious/secular divide has evolved and what this informs about the broader reorganization of the country's party system. It focuses on the abolishment of the headscarf ban in 2013, one of the most-known measures enacted by ruling Justice and Development Party (AK Party) over its twenty year-long tenure in the Turkish government. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, the headscarf ban in public sector and education was pivotal in public and political debates. However, since 2013, the attempt to "normalize" the headscarf issue has been concomitant to the end of the political alliance between the AKP and the Gülen movement and the emergence of new conservative parties opposing the AKP. Against this backdrop, the ongoing construction of an alliance regrouping all the opposition parties in view of the 2023 general election draws on a more inclusive redefinition of the secular/religious divide.

***The political spectrum in Turkey: what is Left? Evidence from the case-study of the Republican People's Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi) 2010-2020.*** *Carlo Sanna*
Turkish political space has embodied many of the characteristics attributed by the literature to that of the wider MENA region: a prominent role of the religious-secular divide (Özbudun 2013) that assumes the dimensions of a Kulturkampf (Kalaycıoğlu 2012), a political spectrum dominated by conservative parties (Öniş 2007; Çarkoğlu, Kalaycıoğlu 2009), a left-right axis that appears as reversed (Çarkoğlu 2007; Aydoğan, Slapin 2015; Aydoğan 2021). However, recent transformations of the political regime itself and its rapid backsliding towards what has

been variously defined as an "electoral authoritarianism" (Sözen 2008), a "dominant party system" (Çarkoğlu 2011) or "competitive authoritarianism" (Esen, Gümüşçü 2016, 2021) after the shift to presidentialism in 2017, urge a reconsideration of some paradigms under which Turkish politics, the party system and its actors have been analyzed (Aytürk 2015). The cleavages that – until the first half of the 2010s – have proved useful to understand the collocation on the political spectrum of the various parties in Turkey such as center-periphery (Mardin 1973) or cultural/economic ones (Küçükömer 1994) have been increasingly questioned. This has become more evident as the ruling AKP1, initially viewed as the representative of the peripheral sectors of Turkish society, has regressed up to assuming those characteristics of tutelage, anti-democracy and illiberalism deemed to be typical of the Kemalist occupiers of the "center". The main representative of this Kemalist center has been the Republican People's Party (CHP2). Under the leadership of Deniz Baykal (1992-20103), it has come to represent the archetype of the reversal of the RILE axis: on the one hand describing itself as a "social democratic party" (CHP 2008), on the other incapable of drawing votes from the economically/culturally fragile sectors of Turkish society4 and concerned mainly about representing the staunch defender of laiklik (secularism) which in Turkey is closely associated with the left, while neglecting the equalitarian aspects that constitute the minimal requirement of the left (Bobbio 1994). Leadership change in 2010, with the rise of Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu as the new chairman, has brought analysts and scholars to question whether a change was possible in a party still affected by ideological inconsistency and factionalism (Turan 2006a, 2006b; Ayata, Güneş-Ayata 2007) both attributable to the different interpretations of the left/right divide, secularism, social democracy inside the party. Starting from the theoretical framework provided by the literature on party system in Turkey, my contribution to this panel will be focused on analyzing the existing different interpretations of "being on the left" inside the CHP with regards to social issues and economic matters, and intra-party democracy. In order to analyze this case-study, I argue, resorting only on data such as that of the Manifesto Project or to the content analysis of party documents may be not sufficient. In my research, which studies the evolution of the CHP using the methodology of (present-time5) historical research, aside from archival research conducted in the party archives and documentation center, I make extensive use of semi-structured interviews of party members and party élites, as well as of archival material of the daily newspaper "Cumhuriyet" which, being one of the most read in Turkey and close to the political environment of the CHP itself, is a good source of comments and analyses on the addressed topics.

**PROFILO ACCADEMICO DEL/DELLA/DEI/DELLE PROPONENTE/I – SHORT BIO OF PROPONENTS**

Valeria Resta is adjunct professor at the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart. Her research focuses on the role and functions of political parties in authoritarian and transitional settings across the MENA region. She is the author of *Tunisia and Egypt after the Arab Spring: Party Politics in Transitions from Authoritarian Rule* (Routledge: forthcoming) and of the *Routledge Handbook on Political Parties in the Middle East and North Africa* (with Francesco Cavatorta and Lise Storm). She has also published several journal articles and book chapters.

Maryam Ben Salem is Associate Professor of political science at the Faculty of Law and Political science - University of Sousse- Her research themes focus on political Islam, political participation, new forms of commitment with emphasis in women and youth. She edited *Engagement citoyen et Jeunesse purielle en Tunisie*, Paris, L'harmattan, 2020 (with Mohamed Jouili). She has published several articles and book chapters among them « "God loves the rich." The Economic Policy of Ennahda: Liberalism in the Service of Social Solidarity", *Politics and Religion*, 2020.

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