The Baker Institute held a one-day workshop at Al-Kawakibi Democracy Transition Center in Tunis on February 12, 2018, to discuss the relationship between Islam and politics in Tunisia following the Jasmine Revolution. The workshop’s main focus was the Islamist Ennahdha Party’s growing role in the post-revolutionary period and its ramifications on the religion-politics relationship in the country.

The workshop featured four experts who each presented policy memos: “Too Strategic for the Base: How the Nidaa-Ennahdha Alliance Has Done More Harm Than Good” (Sarah Yerkes), “Where are Ennahdha’s Competitors?” (Sharan Grewal), “A Doomed Relationship: Ennahdha and Salafism” (Sabrina Zouaghi and Francesco Cavatorta), and “The Reconfiguration of Ennahdha’s Recruitment Strategy in Tunisia” (Maryam Ben Salem).

One of the most critical issues the participants discussed was Ennahdha’s recently adopted specialization policy, or takhassus. The papers examined the various implications of this policy on Ennahdha, the evolution of the party’s Islamist identity, how Ennahdha’s support base reacted to the policy, and Ennahdha’s relationship with other political parties in the Tunisian political landscape.

In its 10th party congress, Ennahdha announced that it would separate its political activities from its religious activism. The move was considered a pioneering separation of “mosque and state.” The specialization policy no longer allows Ennahdha party leaders to hold leadership positions in its civil society organizations, particularly its religious associations. Furthermore, party officials are not allowed to deliver Friday sermons or participate in any preaching.
activities. The policy also included a new recruitment strategy, loosening membership requirements in hopes of attracting new blood.

Experts on the subject emphasized the ways in which this specialization policy has ushered in a new phase in Ennahdha, causing a rift between its traditional identity as a movement rooted in political Islam and the secular political party it aspires to be, similar to its counterparts in the Tunisian political scene. While a majority of members have voted in favor of the newly adopted policy, many dissenters focused on the potential negative consequences for the party as a result of what they deem secularization efforts. Among the criticisms was how this policy would abruptly sever Ennahdha’s relationship to religion.

By contrast, those in favor of the new policy believe that the change was years in the making, and its implementation was a response to long-brewing trends within the party and broader Tunisian society. The party’s revised identity is not an outcome of Ennahdha’s internal struggles only, but also a reaction to the increasingly hostile global view of Islamist movements following the rise of violent Islamist groups such as ISIS.

While the experts noted that there is optimism about Ennahdha’s new identity both within and outside of the party, Ennahdha might face electoral losses in the short term despite the expectation that the gains will outweigh its losses in the long run as a result of the specialization policy. The party’s ideological and organizational transformation was accompanied by Ennahdha’s alliance with Nidaa Tounes, a party considered a remnant of the past regime.

These two developments—the specialization policy and the alliance with Nidaa Tounes—exemplify the Ennahdha leadership’s new approach to politics in Tunisia, according to the participants’ analysis. They represent the materialization of Ennahdha’s intention to abandon its ideological approach to politics in favor of greater pragmatism. As Tunisian society moves in a more secular direction, the Ennahdha Party is increasingly convinced that it can no longer rely solely on its Islamist doctrine for votes and needs a new political identity that will allow the party to remain a viable contender in Tunisian politics.

The answer was Ennahdha’s adoption of revolutionary ideals in the aftermath of the Jasmine Revolution. Since 2011, Ennahdha assumed a leading role in Tunisia’s democratic transition process. The party’s recent rhetoric portrays its latest actions as a furtherance of this perception; Ennahdha claims that its specialization policy is an inevitable step in this direction, and defends its alliance with Nidaa Tounes as the politically “necessary evil” that will save Tunisia’s fragile democratic transition. Attempts at becoming more inclusive, such as transforming into a Muslim democratic party that represents a broader segment of Tunisian society and aligning with a party seen as an element of the toppled former regime, may prove costly for Ennahdha.

On one hand, the specialization policy is expected to cost Ennahdha conservative votes in the upcoming 2019 legislative elections. Some experts predict that the dissident and possibly marginalized conservative voices in the movement may form a splinter party to the right of Ennahdha on the political spectrum and challenge it for the conservative electorate in search of representation. Other conservative supporters anticipate that Ennahdha’s failure in the upcoming elections and party leader Rachid Ghannouchi’s eventual departure from politics will revive the old Ennahdha.
On the other hand, the perception that Ennahdha was dealt the weaker hand in its alliance with Nidaa Tounes is prevalent among many party members and observers alike. Ennahdha’s efforts to appear moderate and pragmatic have weakened its political weight, the participants’ findings showed. Its representatives have failed to execute their campaign promises, its leaders publicly support policies that their constituents did not vote for, and its image as a moralist and reformist party is gradually fading, largely due to its association with Nidaa. Nahadouis feel increasingly disillusioned due to the lack of communication from the party’s leadership regarding the alliance.

Public opinion polls reveal a deepening rift between the Ennahdha leadership and the party base, with the alliance between Ennahdha and Nidaa Tounes cited as a major reason for the divide. Experts believe the agreement between the two parties has served its purpose, and is no longer a viable political arrangement for either party. The Tunisian political environment no longer depends on consensus between Ennahdha and Nidaa for stability, and has moved on to a different phase in which the specialization of the different political parties and competition between them has become necessary.