Religion and Compromise: Experimental Evidence from Tunisia

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Abstract

Are religious conservatives less willing to compromise than secular conservatives? If so, does engaging religious conservatives with religious counterarguments facilitate compromise? We investigate these questions through a series of citizen debates in Tunisia, in which 602 participants attempted to reach a compromise over two current policy issues. We find that priming the conservative side with a religious justification for their position had no impact on the rate of compromise. However, providing the liberal with a religious counterargument hindered compromise. Through a post-debate questionnaire, we find that a religious counterargument emboldened the liberal to stand their ground, while making the religious conservative defensive and unwilling to compromise. This suggests that engaging religious conservatives with religious reinterpretations may have the opposite of its intended effect, discouraging compromise. Beyond these substantive contributions, this paper also offers a new behavioral measure of compromise that could be profitably exploited in other studies.

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1 Introduction

The rise of the religious right in the United States and Islamist political parties in the Arab world are but the most prominent examples of a global resurgence in religious conservatism (Norris and Inglehart, 2004; Toft, Philpott and Shah, 2011). This resurgence could spell an era of increasing polarization and gridlock, as religious conservatives are widely believed to be unwilling to compromise on their divinely ordained principles. Many scholars of American politics, for instance, have argued that religion has contributed to America’s growing polarization (Layman, 2001; Putnam and Campbell, 2010; Jacoby, 2014). Similarly, scholars of comparative politics and international relations have found that secular-religious cleavages are correlated with polarization, democratic breakdown, and conflict (Rustow, 1970; Reynal-Querol, 2002; Fox, 2004; Svensson, 2007; Hassner, 2009).

Despite this pervasive assumption that religion inhibits compromise, recent history presents major examples of religious conservatives compromising on seemingly fixed principles. Pope Francis has made important strides in tolerating homosexuality and abortion. Tunisian Islamists secured their country’s transition to democracy through major compromises on the nature of the state, gender equality, and freedom of conscience. Even Saudi Arabia has moved to permit women to vote and to drive. These and other examples throw the consensus on religious dogmatism into doubt.

Nevertheless, if religious conservatism does induce dogmatism, what could be done to facilitate compromise? Recent literature (Adkins et al., 2013; Masoud, Jamal and Nugent, 2016; Margolis, 2018) suggests that one avenue may be to engage religious conservatives with progressive reinterpretations of religious texts. By addressing religious conservatives ‘in their own language,’ religious counterarguments may be more likely to convince conservatives to compromise on their textually-derived beliefs. However, these studies are conducted on individuals in isolation: whether an individual would behave similarly over the course of a negotiation with another person is unclear. Compromise is inherently relational, but existing studies neglect to incorporate this interpersonal element into their experimental designs.
Given these gaps in the literature, we develop an original lab experiment to test whether: 1) religious conservatism actually impedes compromise, and 2) liberal religious reinterpretations facilitate compromise. The design asks two individuals holding opposing views on a current policy issue to debate and attempt to find a mutually agreeable position. We examine whether priming the conservative side with religious justifications for their preferred position makes compromise less likely, and whether priming the liberal side with religious counterarguments makes compromise more likely.

This experimental design is innovative in two ways. First, scholars have thus far struggled to directly measure compromise, instead examining attitudes toward compromise in surveys, or measuring respondents’ willingness to give money to their opponents in dictator games. In contrast, we offer a direct, behavioral measure of compromise by examining whether a pair of respondents can reach a compromise during a debate. Second, while observational studies are unable to distinguish between the effect of religion and the effect of correlates that may have driven an individual to religion, we employ priming experiments to isolate the effect of religion on compromise.

We conducted our study in Tunisia, where newfound freedoms of expression won during the Arab Spring permit respondents to openly debate religion and politics. In our first study in 2016-2017, 240 Tunisians debated whether to allow the sale of alcohol. In a second study in 2018, 362 Tunisians debated whether women are as qualified as men for political leadership. Across both issues, we found the same two, surprising findings.

First, in contrast to the literature, our results suggest that religious conservatives may be no more dogmatic than secular conservatives. Priming the conservative debaters to think of religious justifications for banning alcohol or prohibiting women from political leadership had no effect on their rate of compromise with secular, liberal interlocutors (around 40-50%). This finding challenges the prevailing assumption that religious conservatives are particularly resistant to compromise, and thus a driver of polarization and conflict.

Second, we find that encouraging liberals to engage their conservative interlocutors on re-
religious grounds tends to backfire. Priming the liberal debaters with religious reinterpretations that justify the sale of alcohol or permit women to hold political office sharply decreased their rate of compromise with religious, conservative interlocutors (around 20-30%). Through a post-debate questionnaire, we find that this puzzling effect may obtain through two channels. First, when faced with a religious counterargument, religious conservatives became defensive, expressing less support for differences in religious interpretations and for democracy. At the same time, liberals were emboldened by religious justifications for their position, expressing less pressure to conform to the views of their religious community. Both of these effects – the ‘defense conservative’ and the ‘emboldened liberal’ – combined to inhibit compromise.

These results dampen optimism that religious reinterpretations are a possible remedy to polarization. Yet as we discuss in the conclusion, the effect of religious reinterpretations may vary based on the context, the interlocutor, or the approach. While religious reinterpretations should not be discarded as a potential solution, these results caution us to reconsider exactly how and when they would be effective.

2 Religious Conservatism and Compromise

Contrary to the predictions of the “secularization thesis” (Durkheim, 1912; Freud, 1927; Weber, 1930), religion has not been relegated to the dustbin of history. Surprisingly, religion – and especially religious conservatism – has witnessed a global political resurgence. The rise of Evangelical Christians in the United States, Islamist political parties in the Middle East and North Africa, and Hindu nationalists in India are just the most prominent examples of a global entrance of religious conservatives into politics (Norris and Inglehart, 2004; Toft, Philpott and Shah, 2011).

Many have blamed this resurgence of religious conservatism for increasing levels of polarization and gridlock. In American politics, for instance, Geoffrey Layman writes that: “at the heart of the culture wars are deep-seated religious and moral divisions. On one side
[are] religious traditionalists [who...] believe in certain non-negotiable moral ‘truths’ and see these truths as the backbone of American society” (Layman, 2001, p. 3). With the religious right resistant to compromise, American politics has become increasingly divisive (Putnam and Campbell, 2010; Jacoby, 2014).

This narrative resonates in the Arab world, where a popular explanation for the failure of the Arab Spring is that elections led to an ‘Islamist winter,’ empowering Islamist political parties who were by nature resistant to compromise. Indeed, a central proposition in the comparative study of democratization is that secular-religious cleavages are particularly detrimental to compromise, and thus to democratic transitions. Dankwart Rustow, for instance, writes that “on matters of economic policy and social expenditures you can always split the difference. [...] But there is no middle position [...] between Calvinism, Catholicism, and secularism as principles of education” (Rustow 1970, p. 360). The deleterious effect of religion on democratic compromise is assumed to be especially strong for Islam: “Where the scriptures are both holy and explicit, as is the case in Islam, pragmatic compromise will be very difficult” (Waterbury 1994, p. 39; see also Kalyvas 2000).

The assumption that religion inhibits compromise also colors prominent theories of international relations, where conflicts are thought to be more intense and less amenable to negotiated settlements when even one side is motivated by religion. Jonathan Fox, for instance, argues that religious conflicts “tend to be more intractable due to the non-bargainable nature of the motivations behind them” (Fox 2004, p. 58; see also Reynal-Querol 2002, Svensson 2007, Hassner 2009, Toft, Philpott and Shah 2011).

These studies, however, suffer from three methodological limitations. First, they are conducted at the cross-national level, and therefore provide little systematic evidence of religious dogmatism where it is theorized to be operating – at the individual level. Second, they are observational studies, leaving us unsure if religion is causing dogmatism, or if it is some correlate of religion (lower income and education, for instance). Finally, there is little discussion of the mechanisms for why religious conservatives would be less willing to
compromise: do they fear divine punishment for straying from God’s will, do they incur reputational costs among their religious peers for compromising, or are they simply more confident that their position is correct given its religious basis?

One exception in this literature is Cohen-Zada, Margalit and Rigbi (2016), who exploit variation in the timing of a Jewish holiday to conduct a natural experiment in Israel. Surveying respondents immediately before and after the Selichot, they find that the heightened religiosity induced by intense prayer decreased support for compromise with the Palestinians, and that this effect may have operated through an increased tolerance for risk.

However, recent work in political psychology and neuroscience suggest that all belief systems – not just religious ones – are resistant to compromise (Haidt, 2012). Ryan (2017) finds that “moralized attitudes” inhibit compromise, observing that these morals need not be religious. Kaplan, Gimbel and Harris (2016) similarly find that any strongly-held belief system activates identity and self-representation portions of the brain, leading liberals to discount evidence countering their political beliefs. Lastly, the one study that has explicitly compared religious to nonreligious individuals (Harris et al., 2009) finds no difference in the neural systems activated when evaluating statements, though they did not examine their willingness to compromise.

If religious conservatism does impede compromise, a natural follow-up question is: what can be done to encourage compromise? The political theorist John Rawls argued that religious discourse should be replaced with more civic forms of dialogue, asserting that: “Citizens [...] cannot reach agreement or even approach mutual understanding on the basis of their irreconcilable comprehensive doctrines. [...] I propose that in public reason comprehensive doctrines of truth or right be replaced by an idea of the politically reasonable addressed to citizens as citizens” (Rawls 1997, p. 766, see also Rawls 1993, Ackerman 1980).

Yet the proposition that religion be fully excluded from politics has not gained much traction. On the one hand, such a proposal may require the forced repression of religious conservatives, something that liberal democracies are rightfully unwilling to tolerate (Stepan,
2000). On a theoretical level, moreover, such a proposal seems to force an unequal burden on individuals who support a position for religious reasons to present secular ones in public debate, whereas secular individuals have no corresponding duty to present their views in anything other than their secular beliefs (Audi and Wolterstorff, 1997).

Recent literature has argued that another way to facilitate compromise across secular-religious divides is for liberals to present a religious reinterpretation in support of their side. By addressing religious conservatives ‘in their own language,’ liberals may be more able to convince religious conservatives to budge from their seemingly fixed positions. Experimental research in both American and comparative contexts provides strong evidence that religious appeals can affect evaluations of political candidates and policies.¹ Adkins et al. (2013), for instance, find that respondents were more supportive of government job assistance for homosexuals when told that Catholic leaders supported it. Margolis (2018) similarly finds that listening to a pro-immigration radio advertisement by Evangelical leaders increased support for immigration. And in what appears to be the first experimental test involving a textual reinterpretation, Masoud, Jamal and Nugent (2016) find that a Quranic reinterpretation in favor of gender equality increased support for female political leadership in Egypt.

While an important step forward, these survey experiments are limited in three ways. First, they are conducted among individuals in isolation, examining how respondents update their policy preferences based on new information. However, compromise is a group process: whether individuals will respond similarly during a discussion with another person remains untested. Second, these studies are testing a more challenging outcome than necessary: compromise does not require religious conservatives to change their ideal policies, merely that they accept a policy outcome that is not their preferred policy. Given our motivation, this study examines compromise, rather than a change in policy preferences. Finally, existing literature relies on attitudinal measures of respondents’ willingness to compromise. A behavioral measure of compromise can provide us with more confidence in whether using religious

¹See, i.e., Weisberg (2004); Campbell, Green and Layman (2011); Weber and Thornton (2012); McClendon and Riedl (2014); Glazier (2015) and Condra, Isaqzadeh and Linardi (2017)
reinterpretations is a fruitful way to engage religious conservatives in practice.

3 Experimental Design

This paper offers several methodological innovations in measuring compromise. Scholars have generally pursued one of two approaches: (1) examining attitudes toward compromise in surveys, or (2) measuring respondents’ willingness to give money to another participant in behavioral games. Ryan (2017) provides a new variant on the latter by gauging respondents’ willingness to accept money when a matched amount would go toward organizations promoting opposing policies. While these behavioral games are an improvement over attitudinal measures, they capture something related to but conceptually distinct from compromise: the outcome is not respondents’ willingness to accept a second-best policy, but rather their willingness to donate money to political opponents.

Instead, we propose to directly measure compromise through a series of citizen debates. Respondents are first presented with a spectrum of possible policies on a political issue, arranged from most liberal to most conservative, and asked to choose their preferred policy. Based on these preferences, we categorize participants into “liberals” and “conservatives” on that particular issue. One liberal and one conservative are then paired, and asked to discuss the issue with each other to see if they can agree on a common policy from the same policy scale. The outcome of these discussions – was a common policy reached or not – provides a behavioral measure of respondents’ ability to compromise. Crucially, this two-person debate also captures the interpersonal or relational element of compromise, rather than examining individuals in isolation.

Our primary interest in these debates is whether individuals motivated by religion are less willing to compromise than individuals holding secular motivations. In other words, we are interested in why individuals hold the positions they do. For instance, are conservatives who want to ban alcohol motivated primarily by religious reasons (alcohol is a sin) or
secular reasons (alcohol is bad for one’s health)? We examine whether the type of reason, religious or secular, affects the rate of compromise. For clarity, in the discussion below, “liberal/conservative” refers to respondents’ policy positions, while “secular/religious” refers to respondents’ motivations for holding those positions.

One approach to analyzing the effect of religion on these debates would be observational: examining whether individuals who self-identify as religious or motivated by religion are less willing to compromise. While we present these results, the possibility of unobserved confounding variables renders this correlational approach unable to demonstrate a causal effect of religion on compromise. Therefore, we instead experimentally manipulate the salience of religious reasons. To do so, we present both sides – liberals and conservatives – with a “commonly heard argument for their side” to help them prepare for the debate. Conservatives are primed with arguments in favor of the conservative position, while liberals read arguments in favor of the liberal position. The key experimental manipulation is to randomize the type of argument – religious or secular – given to each respondent. Religious reasons featured a religious verse, while secular reasons relied on secular logic and an appeal to secular values.

With these primes, we create three treatment groups:

Table 1: Treatment Groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prime</th>
<th>Liberal v. Conservative</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Secular</td>
<td>Secular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secular</td>
<td>Religious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious</td>
<td>Religious</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The first treatment group, secular-secular, primes both sides with secular argumentation, representing a Rawlsian scenario where religion is excluded from public debate. The second treatment group, secular-religious, maintains the secular prime for the liberal, but gives a religious prime to the conservative, mimicking the rise of religious conservatism. The final treatment group, religious-religious, maintains the religious prime to the conservative, but now gives a religious counterargument to the liberal.²

²We do not create a fourth, religious-secular, treatment group, which would pit a religious liberal against
This design facilitates direct tests of both the religious dogmatism and religious reinterpretations hypotheses described above. First, if religious conservatives are less willing to compromise than secular conservatives, we would expect the rate of compromise to be lower in treatment group 2 (secular-religious) than treatment group 1 (secular-secular). In both treatment groups, the liberal receives a secular prime; the difference is whether the conservative is given a religious or secular prime, allowing us to isolate the effect of religious conservatism on compromise. Second, if liberal religious counterarguments facilitate compromise, we would expect treatment group 3 (religious-religious) to have a higher rate of compromise than treatment group 2 (secular-religious). In both cases, the conservative receives a religious prime; the difference is whether the liberal is given a religious counterargument.

3.1 Location and Topics of Debate

To test these propositions, we conducted two rounds of citizen debates (N = 602) in Tunis, Tunisia from 2016-2018. Several factors made Tunisia an ideal setting for research on religion and compromise. First, as a Muslim-majority country, Tunisia serves as a ‘hard case’ for religious compromise. Since many view Islam to be an especially rigid and demanding religion (i.e. Huntington, 1996; Hamid, 2016), evidence of successful compromise here would hold important implications for religion and compromise in other contexts. As the only Arab Spring country to successfully democratize, Tunisia also offers a uniquely hospitable environment to study Islam, as Tunisians are now free to debate politics and religion without fear of government repression or monitoring.

Moreover, Tunisia’s young democracy has seen increasing polarization around a secular-religious cleavage. This polarization makes Tunisia a fascinating venue for the study of religion and compromise, and also lends our research practical importance. Scholarship suggests a secular conservative, as we believe this scenario is the least realistic.

3We acknowledge that Tunisia’s successful democratization may indicate that the relationship between religion and compromise here may not be generalizable to the rest of the Arab world. We discuss concerns of external validity in the conclusion.
that young, deeply polarized democracies are at the greatest risk of democratic breakdown (Sartori, 1966; Rustow, 1970; Bermeo, 2003). From a policy standpoint, understanding the relationship between religion and compromise in Tunisia in particular may have important implications for the consolidation of its fledgling democracy.

To ensure that our results are not skewed by the peculiarities of any particular debate topic, we conducted debates on two issues in Tunisia: the sale of alcohol and female political leadership. These topics were chosen with two criteria in mind: 1) political salience, to ensure respondents had a policy preference and actively participated in the debates; and 2) the presence of secular and religious arguments on both sides of the debate, allowing us to compare secular and religious conservatives as well as secular and religious liberals. As we will see, our results hold for both topics, suggesting that our findings represent a more general trend.

4 Experiment 1: The Sale of Alcohol

In the first study, 240 individuals in Tunis debated whether to restrict the sale of alcohol. The sale of alcohol is a salient issue in Tunisian politics. The 2011 Jasmine Revolution that toppled Tunisia’s former dictator soon brought Islamists to power, sparking fears from Tunisia’s secular community that the Islamists would restrict access to alcohol.4 While the Islamist party Ennahdha slightly increased alcohol taxes, the subsequent secular-led government of Nidaa Tounes, to the ire of Islamists, slashed taxes on spirits from 650 to 50 percent in 2016.5

Further, alcohol was a fortuitous topic of debate because it featured a viable liberal reinterpretation of the Quran. The dominant interpretation of the Quran supports banning alcohol, drawing on verses labelling it an “abomination” (chapter 5:90), asserting that it

has more sin than profit (2:220), and imploring believers not to “draw near prayer when you are intoxicated” (4:43). However, other verses treat alcohol more positively. Chapter 47:15 observes that in Heaven, there are “rivers of wine, a joy to those who drink, and rivers of honey, pure and clear.” On Earth, chapter 16:67 notes that “from the fruits of the date palm and the grapevine, you obtain intoxicants and goods. Verily in that is a sign for those who reason.” While one interpretation of this verse is to praise those who can distinguish between intoxicants and goods, another is to praise those who are able to use reason to obtain intoxicants and goods from these fruits (Kueny, 2001; Kennedy, 2002). While the dominant interpretation today is that alcohol is a sin, “a careful and critical analysis of all references reveals that the Quran treats wine with a great ambivalence; the potent liquid that constitutes an abomination in one verse becomes a source of “good food” in another. [...] The prohibition is hardly unconditional or absolute” (Kueny, 2001, p. 1).

The history of Islam has also witnessed several examples of liberal reinterpretations regarding alcohol. The Great Imam Abu Hanifa (702-772), the founder of the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam, had observed that since the Quran only labeled wine (khamr) an abomination, beer and other forms of alcohol may be permissible up to the point of intoxication (Cook, 2000; Kelsay, 2007). More recently, citing Abu Hanifa, an Islamic cleric and member of the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs, Khaled El Gendy, contended that drinking alcohol without getting drunk is not sinful. Similarly, Azhar-educated Imam Mostafa Rashed argued that the Quran bans drunkenness, not alcohol.

4.1 Policy Scale and Primes

We conducted the debates on alcohol in two waves in August 2016 and January 2017. In each wave we recruited 120 Tunisians for a total of 240 respondents. For our field sites,

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we rented storefronts in downtown Tunis close to major metro stations (Bardo in August 2016; Passage in January 2017). Proximity to a metro station allowed us to recruit a diverse sample of everyday Tunisians, both those who live downtown and those commuting to work.

During recruitment, respondents were asked a simple dichotomous question about whether they supported banning or allowing the sale of alcohol, allowing us to recruit even numbers of pro-ban and anti-ban individuals to pair in the debates. In the lab, respondents first answered a pre-treatment questionnaire, which included demographic and attitudinal questions. Respondents were then asked for their preferred position on the sale of alcohol among the following six positions:

1. Allow the sale of alcohol completely.

2. Allow the sale of alcohol except on Fridays and during Ramadan.

3. Allow the sale of alcohol except in grocery stores and on Fridays and during Ramadan.

4. Increase the tax on alcohol and ban it from grocery stores and on Fridays and during Ramadan.

5. Ban the sale of alcohol to Muslims and increase the tax on alcohol for non-Muslims.

6. Ban the sale of alcohol completely.

The ends of the scale represent the two extremes – allow or ban the sale of alcohol completely – while the intermediary positions mirror real-world policy compromises. Position 2 represents the status quo in Tunisia – a fairly liberal Muslim country. Positions 3 and 4 represent policies pursued in more conservative Egypt, while the more extreme position 5 applies in Saudi Arabia. This policy scale is thus a realistic way to think about the possible compromise positions regarding alcohol in Muslim-majority countries.

Figure 1 depicts the policy preferences of the 240 participants in the debates. Naturally, the status quo option in Tunisia (position 2) sees the highest support, yet there is wide
Upon selecting their preferred positions, respondents were paired so that a respondent selecting positions 1-3 (hereafter, the liberal) was matched with a respondent selecting 4-6 (the conservative). Each pair was asked to discuss prohibitions on alcohol for five minutes, debating with one another in an attempt to reach a compromise position. Before the debates began, each participant was given a chance to prepare by reading a short paragraph that described a “commonly heard argument for their side.” As we randomly manipulated the content of these primes, the 240 participants and therefore 120 debates were divided into the following three treatment groups:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Liberal/Conservative</th>
<th>Debates</th>
<th>Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Secular/Secular</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secular/Religious</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious/Religious</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>120</strong></td>
<td><strong>240</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the first treatment group, the liberal and conservative respondents received the following secular arguments in favor of their positions:
Secular, Liberal: The sale of alcohol has been an important part of the Tunisian economy for hundreds of years. The Association for the Production of Beverages in Tunisia found that sales of local beer bring in 23 million dinars in revenue each year. Banning alcohol would have negative consequences for tourism and for the economy, and would in addition represent an unwarranted infringement on freedom.

Secular, Conservative: The consumption of alcohol contributes to addiction and unproductive behavior, and is detrimental to ones health. The World Health Organization states that: “Alcohol consumption is a causal factor in more than 200 disease and injury conditions [... including] mental and behavioural disorders, [...] liver cirrhosis, some cancers and cardiovascular diseases, as well as injuries resulting from violence and road clashes and collisions.”

In the second treatment group, the liberal received the same secular prime, while the conservative now received the following religious prime:

Religious, Conservative: The Quran explicitly prohibits the consumption of alcohol. For instance, chapter 5:90 states: “O you who believe! Intoxications and gambling, (dedication of) stones and (divination by) arrows are an abomination of Satan's handwork: avoid it so that you may prosper.”

In the final treatment group, the conservative received that same religious prime, while the liberal now received a religious counterargument:

Religious, Liberal: Several verses of the Quran permit the consumption of alcohol. For instance, chapter 16:67 states: “And from the fruits of the date-

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11 We were careful not to mention a particular individual as the source of this reinterpretation, as we wanted to isolate the effect of a reinterpretation from the endorsement of a particular scholar.
palm and the grape-vine, you obtain intoxicants and goods. Verily in that is a sign for people who reason.”

4.2 Covariate Balance and Manipulation Check

To ensure balance across treatment groups, we blocked explicitly on gender, ensuring each treatment group of 40 debates had 27 male-male pairs, 3 female-female pairs, and 10 mixed pairs. These proportions were based on the rate of recruitment of women and men in the pilot. While this breakdown would not be ideal for examining heterogenous treatment effects by gender, for this study we merely require the gender of the pair to be balanced across each treatment group. Conscious of enumerator effects, all debate moderators were women. In addition, we blocked on whether the enumerator was veiled (wearing hijab) or unveiled, ensuring 18 of 40 debates in each treatment group were moderated by a veiled enumerator. Balance on other covariates was achieved through randomization of the treatment. Appendix A demonstrates that randomization produced relatively similar samples of respondents in each treatment group. Still, we also present results controlling for these covariates to demonstrate the robustness of our finding to alternative specifications.

To determine whether the debate cues correctly primed respondents to use either religious or secular arguments during the debates, moderators in wave 2 (January 2017) were asked to record what type of arguments (religious or secular) each side employed. Figure 2 plots the proportion of respondents that invoked religious arguments, broken into conservative and liberal subgroups.

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12 See, for instance, Kane and Macaulay (1993) and Benstead (2013).
13 See Blaydes and Gillum (2013) for a discussion of veiled enumerator effects.
In line with the primes, Figure 2 shows that in the secular-religious treatment condition, conservatives were about 45 percentage points more likely to use religious argumentation (p=0.003) than in the secular-secular treatment condition. Similarly, liberals in the religious-religious condition were about 35 percentage points more likely to use religious argumentation than they were in the secular-religious condition (p=0.007). In short, the primes increased the use of religious arguments in the debates as designed.

### 4.3 Compromise

Figure 3 presents our dependent variable: the proportion of debates reaching compromise in each treatment group. In the secular-secular treatment, 20 of 40 groups (50%) were able to find a mutually-agreeable compromise position. In the secular-religious treatment, which primed the conservative with a religious verse, 23 of 40 groups (57.5%) reached a compromise. In contrast to the prevailing assumption that religious conservatives inhibit compromise, we find that the rate of compromise did not decrease, and even slightly increased, when the conservative was primed with religion.
We next examine the effect of liberal religious reinterpretations on compromise. In the religious-religious treatment, where the liberal is attempting to persuade his religious conservative interlocutor on his own turf, only 14 of 40 pairs (35\%) were able to reach a compromise. Liberal efforts to persuade conservatives by “speaking their language” appears to have backfired. A two-sided t-test between the secular-religious and religious-religious treatments finds this difference to be statistically significant at $p=0.044$.\footnote{A comparison of religious-religious v. both secular-religious and secular-secular pooled is marginally significant at $p=0.052$.}

To test the statistical significance of these differences in the presence of covariates, Table 3 presents three regressions with the dependent variable as whether a group reached compromise (0-1). In all models, the omitted or reference category is the secular-religious treatment. For models 1 and 2, the unit of analysis is the debate; to facilitate the inclusion of individual-level covariates, model 3 makes the individual the unit of analysis and clusters standard errors at the debate level. Debate-level controls include the ideological distance between the two debater’s policy preferences (on the 6-point scale), the gender of the pair, whether the enumerator was unveiled or wearing hijab, and the wave the debate was conducted (August 2016 or January 2017). Individual-level covariates include age, sex, outward
piety (veil, zabiba,\textsuperscript{15} or religious beard), employment, student, urban, marriage, education, income, preferred position, intensity of preference, and willingness to hear an alternative viewpoint.

Across all three models, there is no statistically significant difference in the rate of compromise between the secular-secular treatment and the secular-religious treatment (the reference category). Thus, priming the conservative side with a religious verse in support of their side did not decrease the rate of compromise. The religious-religious condition, however, reliably generates significantly or marginally significantly lower rates of compromise than secular-religious, whether with no controls (model 1), debate-level controls (model 2), or individual-level controls (model 3). This suggests that the liberal religious counterarguments indeed backfired, reducing the rate of compromise. The only covariate reaching significance was having a debate moderator wearing a hijab, which increased the rate of compromise.

Observational approaches corroborate these experimental findings. Prior to the primes, respondents were asked an open-ended question about why they chose their preferred position on the 1-6 alcohol scale. Enumerators coded their stated justifications as either secular or religious. We use these codings to identify debate pairs in which both sides expressed secular motivations, and compare them to debate pairs in which the conservative side expressed religious motivations. By this count, in the 94 secular-secular debates, 38\% were able to find a compromise. In the 25 secular-religious debates, a similar 40\% reached a compromise, not significantly different from secular-secular (p=0.88), including when controlling for the primes (p=0.93). Further observational analyses based on observed religiosity (veil, zabiba, beard) or self-described religiosity (post-debate) similarly suggest that religious conservatives are no more dogmatic than secular ones (Appendix A).

In short, the data revealed two findings: (1) religious conservatives were no less willing to compromise than secular conservatives, and (2) providing liberals with religious reinter-

\textsuperscript{15}A zabiba is a raisin-shaped mark on one’s forehead induced by pressing a forehead onto a prayer mat.
Table 3: Rate of Compromise By Treatment Group, Alcohol

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Logistic Regression</th>
<th>OLS, clustered SE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1)</td>
<td>(2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secular-Secular</td>
<td>−0.302 (0.450)</td>
<td>−0.320 (0.469)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious-Religious</td>
<td>−0.921** (0.461)</td>
<td>−0.912* (0.481)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Debate Level Covariates**
- ideological distance: −0.252 (0.183) −0.050 (0.046)
- male-male pair: 0.322 (0.786) 0.089 (0.171)
- mixed pair: 0.853 (0.842) 0.206 (0.188)
- veiled enumerator: 0.693* (0.395) 0.179* (0.093)
- wave: −0.578 (0.394) −0.123 (0.096)

**Individual Level Covariates**
- age: 0.005 (0.004)
- female: 0.013 (0.041)
- outward piety: 0.013 (0.063)
- unemployed: −0.145 (0.167)
- student: 0.016 (0.095)
- urban: −0.050 (0.089)
- married: −0.094 (0.105)
- education: 0.0005 (0.030)
- income: 0.061 (0.148)
- intensity: −0.016 (0.106)
- hear: 0.087 (0.076)
- position 2: 0.016 (0.099)
- position 3: −0.079 (0.125)
- position 4: −0.022 (0.069)
- position 5: 0.030 (0.105)
- position 6: −0.021 (0.099)

**Clustered SE**
- Constant: 0.302 (0.320) 1.237 (1.156) 0.554 (0.382)

**Unit of Analysis**
- Debate, Debate, Individual
- Observations: 120, 120, 237
- Log Likelihood: −80.898, −76.455
- Akaike Inf. Crit.: 167.796, 168.910
- R²: 0.125
- Adjusted R²: 0.031

*Note:* *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01
*Note:* The reference group is Secular-Religious.
pretations undermined the rate of compromise.

4.4 Exploring the Mechanisms

Why did the liberal religious reinterpretation backfire? We find that this breakdown in dialogue stemmed from two distinct mechanisms: conservatives grew defensive in response to religious counterarguments, while liberals were emboldened by the belief that religion was on their side.

4.4.1 The Defensive Conservative

In the post-debate questionnaire, respondents in wave 2 were asked for their level of support with the statement: “Differences in interpretations of religious matters is a good thing.” For conservative respondents, this statement captures whether they are open or close-minded toward religious reinterpretations. Figure 4 plots the level of support by treatment condition. Results suggest that the conservative side was significantly more opposed to multiple interpretations in the religious-religious treatment compared to the secular-religious treatment. Appendix A (Table 1, model 1) demonstrate that this effect is significant at p=0.021.

Figure 4: Support for Multiple Religious Interpretations, Alcohol
In short, when faced with a religious counterargument, the conservative side expressed less support for multiple interpretations of religion. This suggests that religious conservatives may become defensive and resistant when confronted with alternative interpretations of their religion, producing lower levels of compromise.

4.4.2 The Emboldened Liberal

Religious conservatives, however, were not the only force obstructing compromise. We also find that their liberal opponents were emboldened after reading the religious counterargument. Respondents were asked for their level of agreement with the statement: “I feel pressure to conform to the opinions of members of my religious community.” If they became emboldened, liberals with a religious counterargument should feel less pressure to conform to the dominant religious interpretation. Figure 5 suggests that while liberals in the secular-religious treatment felt strong pressure to conform, liberals in the religious-religious treatment – now equipped with a religious counterargument – felt significantly less pressure to conform (from 2.89 to 1.55). Appendix A (Table 4, model 2) shows that this effect is significant at p=0.012.

Figure 5: Pressure to Conform to Religious Community, Alcohol
Therefore, a religious counterargument emboldened the liberal side to reject the validity of the dominant religious interpretation, producing lower levels of compromise. This suggests that both sides are to blame for the lower level of compromise in the religious-religious treatment condition: a defensive conservative, and an emboldened liberal.

5 Experiment 2: Female Political Leadership

Experiment 1 produced two surprising findings: (1) religious conservatives were no more dogmatic than secular conservatives, and (2) liberal religious counterarguments undermined compromise. To examine if these results were limited to the issue of alcohol or reflected a more general trend, we conducted a second round of citizen debates in Tunis in June 2018. This time, 362 citizens (181 pairs) debated whether to allow women to serve in executive positions, such as president, prime minister, governor, or mayor.

Female leadership was a particularly controversial topic. On the day our debates ended, Tunis elected its first female mayor, Souad Abderrahim.\(^\text{16}\) Her candidacy for mayor had sparked heated controversy, with the typically secular ruling party, Nidaa Tounes, making religious arguments against her eligibility. Fouad Bouslema, a spokesman for Nidaa Tounes, claimed that Abderrahim’s candidacy was “unacceptable” in a Muslim country because as a woman “she cannot be present in the mosque on the eve of the twenty-seventh night of Ramadan,”\(^\text{17}\) referring to a tradition of political leaders attending a religious ceremony at the city’s Zaytouna mosque on Laylat al-Qadr, the most sacred night of Ramadan.

In addition to its political saliency, the topic of female political leadership also features religious arguments on both sides of the debate. Conservative voices often draw upon Quranic verses to argue that women should not serve in political positions. Some cite a verse from Surat al-Nisa (chapter of women): “Men are the protectors and maintainers of women,” which “they interpret to mean that God gave men more capabilities than women” (Masoud, 16For more on Abderrahim, see http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/76810. 17See http://www.businessnews.com.tn/foued-bouslema--nous-sommes-un-pays-islamique-malheureusement,520,79915,3.)
Jamal and Nugent, 2016). Others cite a hadith by Imam Bukhari about the Battle of the Camel: “When news reached the Prophet (peace be upon him) that the Persians had appointed Khosrow II’s daughter as their ruler, he said: ‘A people who make a woman their ruler will never be successful.’”

On the liberal side, progressive scholars deploy reinterpreations of the Quran to permit women in positions of authority. In their survey experiment in Egypt, Masoud, Jamal and Nugent (2016) test the effect of the following verse from Surat al-Tawba (chapter of atonement): “Believing men and believing women are protectors of one another,” which “they interpret to mean that God does not distinguish between men and women in their capabilities.” Others cite a verse from Surat Ali Imran suggesting that God equally values the work of men and women: “I shall not lose sight of the labor of any of you who labors in My way, be it man or woman; each of you is equal to the other.”

5.1 Policy Scale and Primes

We rented the same shopfront in downtown Tunis near the Passage metro station to serve as our field laboratory. As before, we recruited even numbers of adult Tunisians for and against female political leadership. In the pre-treatment questionnaire, respondents were asked for their preferred policy among the following six options:

1. A law should guarantee that women are eligible for president and prime minister.

2. Women should be permitted in any executive position.

3. Women should not be permitted to be the president of the republic.

4. Women should not be permitted to be president or prime minister.

5. Women should not be permitted to be president, prime minister, or governor.

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18 We are indebted to our survey team, One to One for Research and Polling, for bringing this hadith to our attention. The woman referred to in the hadith is Boran, first Queen of the Sasanian Empire (r. 629-630 and 631-632).

19 Option 1 was added after a pre-test revealed higher support for option 2 than we had expected.
6. Women should not be permitted to assume any executive position.

Figure 6 presents the preferred policies of our 362 participants. The status quo, option 1, received the most support, though a sizable number of debaters were found on every position. We categorized the 50% of participants selecting options 1 and 2 as “liberals” and paired them up with the 50% choosing options 3-6.

![Figure 6: Preferred Positions on Female Leaders (N=362)](image)

As before, the 362 participants were randomly sorted into three treatment groups:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Treatment Groups</th>
<th>Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Secular/Secular</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secular/Religious</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious/Religious</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>362</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the first treatment group, both sides received a secular argument in favor of their position:

**Secular, Liberal:** Some say that there is no problem if a woman assumes a political office, such as the presidency of the republic or the mayor of Tunis. And

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20The 2014 Tunisian constitution guarantees both male and female citizens the right to run for president.
they rely on article 21 of the constitution, which states: “all citizens, male and female, have equal rights and duties, and are equal before the law without any discrimination.” And they interpret it to mean that men and women are equally capable of serving in positions of authority. They also observe that article 74 grants all male and female voters the right to run for the presidency.

**Secular, Conservative:** Some people say it is not good for a woman to assume a political office, such as the presidency of the republic or the mayor of Tunis. And they rely on scientific studies showing that men are seen as more “assertive, independent, self-confident, and prone to act as a leader”\(^{21}\) than women. And they interpret this to mean that women are unfit for positions of authority. They also observe that women are biologically different from men in ways that may impede their judgment.

In the second treatment group, the conservative instead received a religious prime:

**Religious, Conservative:** “Some people say it is not good for a woman to assume a political office, such as the presidency of the republic or the mayor of Tunis. And they rely on a verse from Surat al-Nisa’ in the Holy Qur’an that says, “Men are the protectors and maintainers of women.” And they interpret it to mean that God gave men more capabilities than women. They also rely on a hadith narrated by Imam al-Bukhari: “A people who make a woman their ruler will never be successful.””

In the third treatment group, the liberal received a religious reinterpretation, modeled on the one used by Masoud, Jamal and Nugent (2016):

**Religious, Liberal:** Some say that there is no problem if a woman assumes a political office, such as the presidency of the republic or the mayor of Tunis.

And they rely on a verse from Surat al-Tawba in the Holy Qur’an that says, “Believing men and believing women are protectors of one another.” And they interpret it to mean that God does not distinguish between men and women in their capabilities. They also rely on a verse from Surat Ali’ Imran: “I shall not lose sight of the labor of any of you who labors in My way, be it man or woman; each of you is equal to the other.”

Like experiment 1, treatment groups were blocked explicitly on gender, ensuring that each group of 60 debates included 32 male-male pairs, 22 mixed pairs, and 6 female-female pairs. Given the potential importance of the moderator’s gender on this topic, we also blocked on moderator gender, ensuring that 45% of debates in each treatment group featured a male moderator. Appendix B suggests that the randomization was successful in creating balance on all demographic and attitudinal variables, though we will control for them below regardless. Finally, manipulation checks (see Appendix B) suggest that the primes indeed influenced the types of arguments participants used in the debates, with religious primes considerably increasing the use of religious arguments.

5.2 Compromise

Figure 7 presents the dependent variable, the rate of compromise by treatment group. Overall, the results exactly replicate those from experiment 1. Where both sides received secular primes, about 40% of pairs were able to reach a compromise. When religion was introduced to the conservative through a religious prime, the rate of compromise remained the same – 43%. As with alcohol, religious conservatism on its own did not make compromise more difficult.
However, the liberal religious reinterpretation once again backfired. In the religious-religious treatment group, where liberals were encouraged to use a Quranic reinterpretation to promote female political leadership, the rate of compromise was nearly cut in half, falling to 23%. A two-sided t-test confirms that the difference between secular-religious and religious-religious is significant at $p=0.017$.\textsuperscript{22}

To test the statistical significance of these differences in the presence of controls, Table 5 presents three regressions. Model 1 presents the treatments without controls, model 2 adds debate-level covariates, and model 3 add individual-level ones. Across all three models, the secular-secular treatment is no different than the secular-religious one (the reference group), confirming that religious conservatism did not impede compromise. By contrast, across all three models, the religious-religious treatment had a significantly ($p < 0.05$) lower rate of compromise than secular-religious, suggesting that the liberal religious reinterpretation indeed hindered compromise. Three covariates reached significance: individuals were more likely to find compromise if they were married, lesser educated, and if they had expressed greater interest in hearing the other side prior to the debate.

\textsuperscript{22}Religious-religious is also significantly lower than secular-secular ($p=0.044$).
Table 5: Rate of Compromise By Treatment Group, Female Political Leadership

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>DV: Compromise (0-1)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Logistic Regression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secular-Secular</td>
<td>−0.137 (0.371)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious-Religious</td>
<td>−0.943** (0.401)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Debate Level Covariates</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ideological distance</td>
<td>−0.186 (0.124)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>male-male pair</td>
<td>−0.308 (0.542)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mixed pair</td>
<td>−0.289 (0.563)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>male enumerator</td>
<td>0.262 (0.336)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>veiled enumerator</td>
<td>0.058 (0.631)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Individual Level Covariates</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>age</td>
<td>−0.002 (0.003)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sex</td>
<td>0.012 (0.031)</td>
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<tr>
<td>outward piety</td>
<td>0.052 (0.053)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>unemployed</td>
<td>0.096 (0.102)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>student</td>
<td>0.063 (0.074)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>urban</td>
<td>−0.010 (0.069)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>married</td>
<td>0.151* (0.082)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>education</td>
<td>−0.042* (0.024)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>income</td>
<td>−0.002 (0.009)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>income (refused)</td>
<td>−0.068 (0.076)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>intensity</td>
<td>−0.033 (0.059)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hear</td>
<td>0.143** (0.056)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>position 2</td>
<td>0.039 (0.070)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>position 3</td>
<td>0.042 (0.048)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>position 4</td>
<td>−0.095 (0.074)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>position 5</td>
<td>0.137 (0.112)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>position 6</td>
<td>0.026 (0.055)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Clustered SE</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>−0.268 (0.261)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Unit of Analysis</th>
<th>Observations</th>
<th>Log Likelihood</th>
<th>Akaike Inf. Crit.</th>
<th>R²</th>
<th>Adjusted R²</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Debate</td>
<td>181</td>
<td>−114.294</td>
<td>234.588</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.112</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Debate</td>
<td>181</td>
<td>−112.556</td>
<td>241.111</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.049</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>362</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

*Note: The reference group is Secular-Religious.*
The observational results again corroborate the experimental ones. In the 131 secular-secular match-ups (according to their stated reasons prior to the primes), 37% reached a compromise. In the 44 secular-religious match-ups, 27% were able to, not significantly different from secular-secular \((p=0.25)\), including when controlling for the primes \((p=0.40)\). Similar null results obtain when examining respondent’s observed and stated religiosity (Appendix B).

5.3 Mechanisms

Why did dialogue once again falter in the religious-religious treatment? As with the alcohol experiment, we find evidence that the conservative may have become defensive when confronted with a religious reinterpretation. However, for this issue, we do not also find support for an ‘emboldened liberal.’

5.3.1 The Defensive Conservative

Unlike with experiment 1, the religious-religious treatment did not induce religious conservatives to further oppose multiple interpretations of Islam. However, for this issue we included a second question that better captures the purported defensiveness mechanism. Respondents were asked: “On a scale of 1-5, to what extent do you think your fellow citizens are prepared for democracy?” If religious conservatives felt that their identity was challenged by a misguided religious reinterpretation, then they may be more likely to believe that democracy – which would grant liberals the freedom to enact such reinterpretations as national policy – poses an existential threat. This question directly addresses whether conservatives are willing to tolerate their countrymen voting, speaking, and acting in ways that challenge their core religious beliefs.
Indeed, as Figure 8 illustrates, when faced with a religious reinterpretation, conservatives were significantly less likely to agree that Tunisians are ready for democracy. This drop – about 0.6 points on the 1-5 scale (12%) – was significant at p=0.019. This result provides suggestive evidence that the religious reinterpretations may have backfired because the religious conservatives became defensive.

5.3.2 The Emboldened Liberal?

In the second experiment, we were unable to replicate the results regarding the emboldened liberal. When given a religious reinterpretation, liberals felt no less pressure to conform to their religious community as when they were given secular arguments (p=0.579).

One possible explanation for this null finding is that it was generally easier for liberals to persuade conservatives to their side on female leadership, as compared to alcohol. For alcohol, the average compromise position was 4, closer to the average conservative position (5) than the average liberal position (2) (see Appendix A). For female leadership, however, the average compromise position was 2, closer to the average liberal position (1) than the average conservative position (4) (Appendix B). This likely reveals that Tunisian society is in general more accepting of female political leadership than of alcohol, implying that Tunisian liberals faced less pressure to conform with hardline conservative beliefs on this issue. As a
result, receiving a religious reinterpretation on this issue had little effect on liberals’ sense of
social pressure to conform.

Whatever the reason, liberals did not appear to become emboldened with a religious
reinterpretation on this issue. While we cannot rule out that the liberals are also to blame,
the conservatives at least more consistently appear to be a cause of the breakdown in dialogue
when liberals use religious reinterpretations.

6 Discussion and Conclusion

The consistent results across these two experiments point to two surprising findings. First,
contrary to a widespread assumption in all subfields of political science, religious conserv-
atives may be no more dogmatic than secular conservatives. In both of our experiments,
conservatives primed with a religious verse in favor of their position were no less willing to
compromise than conservatives primed with secular arguments. In fact, the rate of compro-
mise was slightly higher with the conservative religious prime. These results suggest that
the rise of religious conservatism may not spell an era of increasing polarization and conflict.

Second, the results suggest that providing liberal respondents with a religious reinterpre-
tation has the potential to sabotage compromise. Religious reinterpretations may embolden
liberals to reject their opponents’ religious arguments as reasons to compromise, and cause
conservatives to react defensively to challenges to their interpretation of their faith. If any-
thing, the only time religion appears to inhibit compromise is when religious arguments are
appropriated by liberals attempting to woo conservatives to their side.

We do not believe our findings are limited to Tunisia. While some have argued that
Tunisians are culturally more compromising than other societies (Masri, 2017), there is reason
to discount this ‘Tunisian exception.’ First, our results did not find compromise across the
board: when religious conservatives were challenged with religious reinterpretations, they did
become dogmatic. Secondly, this assertion of a Tunisian exception conflates the compromises
of Tunisian party elites with Tunisians generally, many of whom opposed compromise (Marks, 2014). While its party leaders may be more compromising than elsewhere in the region, the same cannot necessarily be said for the everyday Tunisians who participated in our debates.

Our findings suggest that secular-religious cleavages within the same religious tradition are not unduly prone to polarization and conflict. Our results, however, cannot directly speak to cleavages between two different religious groups, such as Cohen-Zada, Margalit and Rigbi (2016)’s study of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Further research is necessary to disentangle whether it is truly religion that undermines compromise in inter-religious conflicts, or if the blame lies with other geopolitical or identity-based factors.

The second major finding from our study concerns the negative effect of religious reinterpretations. This result runs counter to Masoud, Jamal and Nugent (2016)’s finding that religious reinterpretations increase support for gender equality. Moreover, our second experiment explored the same topic (female political leadership) and roughly the same primes as Masoud, Jamal and Nugent (2016). We therefore attribute the difference in results to our experimental methodology. As we have argued, polarization, compromise, and even policy preferences are fundamentally relational phenomena, and should be treated as such when designing experimental measures. A debate or other group-level design may very well produce different results than an individual-level survey experiment.

Two other contextual factors may have also contributed to the opposing outcomes between these two studies. First, the religious reinterpretations in each study had different audiences. In Masoud, Jamal and Nugent (2016)’s study, the effect was largest on less pious respondents, with little to no effect on the most pious. This could be because the most pious have a clearer idea of what the dominant interpretation of the Quran is, and thus discount alternative interpretations. If true, this account could help to explain our findings: when a conservative is given a religious verse—and thus a clear idea of what the Quran says on an issue—a religious counterargument had a negative effect. This is especially troubling given that the most pious—i.e. religious conservatives—are precisely who religious
reinterpretations are designed to convince.

Second, we may expect that the identity and credibility of the interlocutor conveying the religious reinterpretation influences its efficacy. Masoud, Jamal and Nugent (2016), for instance, find that there was a larger effect with a female enumerator compared to a male one. In our case, a religious reinterpretation coming from a liberal may not have carried the same credibility as one coming from a religious scholar, for instance.\textsuperscript{23} The defensive reaction may be a function of the interlocutor and his or her perceived authority to speak on that topic.

In sum, the results in our study do not necessarily mean that religious reinterpretations will backfire in all cases and across all contexts. Future research is needed to tease out if they may be effective, for instance, when conveyed by religious authorities. However, our findings caution us to think through precisely when and how religious reinterpretations could be effective.

\textsuperscript{23}In our study, however, we did not see any difference between religious reinterpretations conveyed by outwardly pious respondents (those with a veil, zabiba, or religious beard) and thus who were not.
References


