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Islamists at the Ballot Box: Findings from Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, and Turkey

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Summary

- There is near-consensus among mainstream Islamist leaders in key Arab countries and Turkey on the value of democratic participation—that is, contestation for power via competitive elections. A number of Islamist groups in the Arab world and Turkey have registered as political parties and participated in elections.
- Islamist parties have members who range from those who are very conservative and develop their political positions based on *shari'a* law to those who are more liberal and promote the practice of *ijtihad* (the reinterpretation of Islamic law to fit current circumstances).
- Regardless of their orientation, independent political parties in the Arab Middle East are deeply constrained by limits on free expression and by districting and voting procedures imposed by semiauthoritarian governments. This permits political liberalization but prevents the development of fully democratic systems.
- Islamist parties are motivated to participate in elections because they generally have far superior organizational support systems, principally through mosque networks, than do secular parties. Given their widespread popularity and superior organizing power, Islamist parties calculate that they have the most to gain as political systems are liberalized.
- As Islamist parties have entered electoral political systems, they have increasingly interacted with secular parties and groups. A key issue is whether, and under what circumstances, cooperation with secular parties promotes moderation in the politics of Islamist parties.
- The evidence of how involvement in electoral politics affects Islamist political parties is mixed. Scholars continue to debate whether Islamist parties moderate their politics to gain political advantage or whether participation in competitive democratizing systems causes them to embrace new positions on core beliefs and values.

Introduction

In an era when much attention has focused on how to promote democracy in Middle Eastern countries with centralized, semiauthoritarian governments, the inclusion of Islamist political parties in electoral politics has been a subject of vigorous debate. How does their inclusion affect the political systems of which they are a part? Does electoral participation by Islamist political parties engender moderation in their politics? If so, is moderation on sensitive political issues a temporary expedient to gain political advantage or is it expressive of changes in core values? Is there evidence that Islamist parties have cooperated or collaborated with secular political parties and other groups to promote political goals of mutual interest, and what happens when they do? Under what circumstances does such cooperation come about, and how extensive is it? When, if at all, does such cooperation induce conservative



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Islamist political parties to moderate their views and political values?

How do Islamist parties relate to centralized political authority in their societies, and what happens when an Islamist party comes into power?

These are among the questions investigated by Professors Janine Astrid Clark, Sultan Tepe, and Carrie Rosefsky Wickham in their work on the role of Islamist parties in the Middle East. Their research, which was based on extensive fieldwork in Turkey (Tepe), Jordan (Clark and Wickham), and Egypt and Kuwait (Wickham), clearly revealed that in each country Islamist parties have eagerly participated in electoral politics. But this participation has had mixed results—both with respect to the impact of participation on the parties' own politics and the parties' impact on the political systems of which they are a part. This report summarizes the professors' findings, which they presented at a recent roundtable discussion organized by the United States Institute of Peace's Grant Program.

Shortcomings in the Scholarly Literature

Professor Wickham argued that much of the existing literature on Islamist parties is problematic on three accounts. First, it tends to equate the notion of "moderation" with "growing support for democracy" on the part of Islamist parties. Wickham indicated that, as a consequence, the literature largely "fails to acknowledge the possibility that Islamist opposition leaders might come to embrace certain aspects of democracy while continuing to reject others." Clark concurred with Wickham that the existing literature has limitations in this respect because it refers principally to "moderate" Islamists as persons who accept the procedural elements of participating in elections—without regard to their vision of what shape a future Islamic state might take—as opposed to "radical" Islamists who reject participation in secular political systems.

According to Wickham, an undifferentiated approach to Islamist parties is reflected in a second problem in most of the literature on the subject, namely the tendency by many scholars to treat moderate Islamist parties as "monolithic entities supportive of a single interpretation of Islam and committed to a single set of political objectives." Instead, Wickham argued, Islamist parties represent a wide array of positions on strategic political issues as well as on "end goals." In this regard, she said that "while the leaders of Islamist opposition groups in Egypt, Jordan, and Kuwait remain committed to the establishment of a political system based on Islamic law, or *shari'a*, they differ among themselves on the question of how much of the 'historical *shari'a*'—that is, the corpus of traditional Islamic legal rulings inherited from the past—can and should be revised." Clark believed that much of the literature that argues that participation in elections and cooperation with non-Islamic groups leads to moderation in political positions and views does so without examining the nature of cooperation—that is, what exactly cooperation entails and whether the conditions of cooperation do, in fact, foster moderation.

The third major problem with the existing literature on Islamist parties, according to Wickham, is that it fails to establish clearly whether they moderate their politics because they actually have come to embrace new positions on "core beliefs and values," or whether they simply take these positions, perhaps on a temporary basis, to gain political advantage. In this connection, Wickham asked, "If Islamist moderation is in fact driven, at least in part, by a deeper process of what we might call 'democratic learning,' what types of participation are likely to trigger it, and why are some Islamist leaders more predisposed to such learning than others?"

Motivations for Participation

Wickham looked for an answer to this question through her research, which has focused on the three main Islamist political organizations in three countries—the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) in Egypt, the Islamic Action Front (IAF) in Jordan, and the Islamic Constitutional Movement (ICM) in Kuwait. Additionally, she examined the behavior of two relatively new Islamist parties, the Wasat (Center) Party in Jordan and the Wasat Party in Egypt, which have split from the IAF and the MB, respectively.

After studying what she described as the "reformist or *islahi* trend within the nonviolent mainstream of the 'revivalist' Islamist movement" in these three countries, Wickham arrived at three main conclusions. First, these parties have pushed for participation in their respective political systems "even when these systems fall short of Islamic ideals." Second, within these groups, Wickham discovered a drive both to promote "greater transparency and internal democracy" within their organizations and a commitment to work with secular parties to achieve shared goals. Third, among these groups, Wickham pointed to what she called "a call for change in the end goals of the Islamic movement, including calls for a revision of historic conceptions of *shari'a* rule." Wickham immediately cautioned, however, that reality is "more complex." The leaders of these parties have differing levels of commitment to the above three variables. She indicated that "while near consensus has been reached on the value of participation in democratic elections, the question of how much, and what type, of organizational and ideological reforms should accompany it remain a subject of heated internal debate [within the various

parties]."

Regarding the first variable—a commitment by Islamist parties to participate in electoral politics—Wickham suggested that it is difficult to ascertain precisely how much electoral support Islamist parties have developed. This is because the semiauthoritarian governments of the countries in which these parties operate place limitations on free communication and on fair districting and voting practices. It seems clear, however, that Islamist parties have an advantage over secular political parties because, according to Wickham, the latter lack "anything equivalent to the vast network of mosques through which Islamists can mobilize support." Wickham suggested that a major reason why Islamist political party leaders have actively engaged in electoral politics and are "some of the most outspoken advocates of democratic elections in the Arab world" is because they assume that "they would be the first to benefit from an expansion of democratic freedoms, at least in the short term." They have justified their participation in electoral politics in relation to the Islamic concept of *shura*, or consultation. In this connection, Wickham added, "Some leaders have even gone so far as to equate *shura* and democracy, in a sharp break from earlier statements depicting calls for democracy as an assault on Islam, and despite the stigma historically attached to democracy as a secular political system rooted in the West."

Embracing New Values?

Wickham examined the evidence on whether the main Islamist parties in Egypt, Jordan, and Kuwait have substantially moderated their views on key social and political issues as a result of their participation in electoral politics. She concluded, first of all, that groups in all three countries have embraced democracy "as a set of procedural rules." The record on their willingness to support "the full range of civil and political rights guaranteed to citizens of democracies in the West," however, is mixed. For example, some leaders of the ICM in Kuwait remain opposed to women's participation in electoral politics as voters and office seekers, but there has been some evolution in the ICM's position on this issue in recent months after prolonged internal debate. IAF leaders in Jordan opposed a temporary law permitting women the right of uncontested divorce. Further, MB leaders in Egypt, like their IAF counterparts, support the right of women to participate in political life. But, according to Wickham, "[they] insist that such participation not lead to any violation of ethical rules laid down by the *shari'a*." In sum, Wickham noted that, "in defense of the religious character of society, and the primacy of the family—rather than the individual—as its basic social unit, leaders of the Brotherhood, IAF, and ICM reject the liberal ethos which informs the secular legal codes of the West." The current views of these three parties regarding Islamic rule, if translated into public policy, pose risks to equal citizenship not only for women but also for minorities and secular and observant Muslims with dissenting views.

That is not the whole story, however. Wickham found evidence of what she called "deepening Islamic auto-reform," particularly among the Wasat Parties in Jordan and Egypt. In what she described as "a progression from strategic participation in elections to calls for changes in . . . end goals," Wickham pointed to growing support among some Islamist leaders for *ijtihad*, the reinterpretation of Islamic sacred texts in relation to current circumstances. In this connection, she indicated that "a small but growing number of Islamist leaders are invoking the principle of *ijtihad* to challenge the validity of traditional *shari'a* rulings inherited from the past, and to articulate new positions on such sensitive issues as the proper scope for intellectual and political pluralism and the rights of women, minorities, and nonobservant Muslims in a modern Islamic state." Wasat Party platforms in Egypt and Jordan give clearest expression to this trend, particularly on the issues of financial and organizational transparency, the role of women and non-Muslims, and cooperation with secular parties and NGOs promoting democratic reforms.

Referring to findings presented by Clark in her presentation, Wickham indicated that some might conclude that her findings regarding the moderating effects of cross-party interaction contradict those of Clark. Clark's case study of the Higher Committee for the Coordination of National Opposition Parties found no evidence that IAF compromised its core political positions through cooperation with secular parties. Wickham emphasized, however, that there is good evidence that the Wasat Parties in Jordan and Egypt have moderated their positions on important issues through sustained dialogue and coalition building with secular parties.

The Relationship between Participation and Value Change

Wickham argued that there is evidence that participation in electoral politics can lead to changes in core values and beliefs among some Islamists, particularly by "middle- generation Islamists who spearheaded the movement's entry into electoral contests for political power." She suggested, moreover, that "some types of participation were more likely to trigger value change than others," particularly when Islamists have the "incentive and opportunity to break out of the insular networks of movement politics and engage in sustained cooperation with secular groups in pursuit of democratic reform." This tendency among the MB, IAF, and ICM, however, is limited by "intragroup dynamics," and conservative old guard leaders in all three groups are

"generally resistant to any redefinition of the group's historic mission." The social conservatism of the base constituencies of the ICM and the IAF, in particular—especially in rural, tribal areas—has also limited or blocked the political evolution in these parties on key issues. Wickham noted that in Egypt and Jordan the Islamist leaders most likely to embrace changes in core values have left the mainstream Islamic organizations and formed their own groups or remained independent. "The result," according to Wickham, "is that revisionist opinion is hemmed in by more conservative voices in the leading political organizations of the Islamic movement, while new parties with a more explicit revisionist agenda have a very limited mass base."

Given these realities, Wickham concluded that mere participation in elections is insufficient to motivate parties to liberalize their party platforms and agendas. She argued that the extent to which parties do embrace change in core values has to do with four variables: (1) whether parties can "go it alone without changing their agenda or must engage in coalition building with other parties or forces, including parties with different positions on important issues; (2) whether such cross-party interaction enhances party leaders' receptivity to new ideas"; (3) whether new ideas can be justified in movement-valid terms; and (4) whether circumstances permit gauto-reformers to "marginalize internal critics and build a constituency for change within their own movement."

Policy Implications for the West

Wickham cautioned that "there is no way that democratic reform in the Arab world can succeed if the region's largest, best organized, and most popular opposition groups"—the Islamist groups she studied—"are excluded from it." Considering how best to incorporate such groups into democratic transitions in the region, she argued for an approach that "falls somewhere between exclusion and inclusion, a path we might call inclusion with conditions" to reduce the possibility of takeover by a "popular but illiberal" group.

According to Wickham, strategies to promote democratic reform involving Islamists should include the following: (1) encouragement for Islamist leaders to "participate in national, cross-partisan efforts to establish a common framework for reform;" (2) a strengthening of secular democratic parties "so they can eventually serve as an effective counterweight to the Islamic trend"; and (3), in the absence of strong secular democratic parties, development of "procedural mechanisms to prevent any one group from monopolizing political power." Such measures could include "construction of heterogeneous electoral districts, the devolution of power from national to subnational governments, rules which promote coalition building and compromise across partisan lines, and the granting of veto power to an unelected but prodemocratic body, such as a constitutional court."

Delving Deeper: A Case Study in Jordan

In an effort to understand precisely what happens when an Islamist party coordinates with non-Islamist political groups to create political change, Professor Janine Astrid Clark focused her research on a particular political coalition in Jordan—the Higher Committee for the Coordination of National Opposition Parties (HC). The size and composition of this group has changed over time but currently encompasses thirteen opposition parties, including the IAF, the most dominant party in the HC, two Ba'athist parties, the Communist Party, and several other leftist parties. Its members meet regularly and frequently. The spokesperson for the HC—a position that rotates among the parties every three months—manages the meetings, while a permanent, non-rotating leadership committee composed of six members from the six biggest and most powerful parties, including the IAF, sets the HC's agenda. According to Clark, the HC has "cooperated successfully on joint actions, such as sending memorandums to the king and/or statements to the press." She added that "the IAF is very proud of the HC and claims that it is a democratic model for the Arab world."

The Islamic Action Front

Licensed as an umbrella political party in 1992 representing primarily the political wing of the Muslim Brotherhood as well as a limited number of independent Islamists, the IAF first came into existence following the 1989 elections. In that election, members of the MB and independent Islamists collectively won 40 percent of the seats in Jordan's lower house of parliament. But implementation of the new law that governed the 1993 elections resulted in a decline of seats won by Islamists by about one-third—even though their share of the total vote was about the same in the two elections—around 16 percent. According to Clark, "While under the old system, voters could cast as many ballots as there were seats in his/her constituency, the new law—still in enforcement today—gives each voter one vote regardless of the number of seats in his/her district (which could vary from two to nine). The new law had a dramatic effect as it forced voters to choose between tribal loyalties and other political leanings, such as Communist or Islamist." Moreover, said Clark, the new law also favored rural, tribal areas and small towns—both traditionally supportive of the monarchy—as opposed to larger urban areas that form the base of Islamist support.

Clark indicated that the IAF chose to sit out the 1997 elections to protest press restrictions and the one-person, one-vote system. When elections were next held in 2003, IAF participation led it to receive more votes than any other political party (winning 17 seats out of 110), although the majority were won by pro-regime candidates. Given these developments, the IAF had significant incentives to participate in the HC as a means of gaining leverage vis-à-vis the regime. Clark argued, "Frozen out of power and faced with declining political liberties and democratic freedoms, the cost of noncooperation [by the IAF] was simply very low."

Compromise on Sensitive Issues?

Clark examined the interactions between the IAF and the HC on three particularly sensitive political issues: the amendment of the honor crimes law (Law 340) in Jordan; the personal status law giving women greater rights to divorce; and the quota promoting women's participation in parliament. Clark argued that the conditions of participation in the HC require very little actual cooperation or compromise from its members. By tracking the positions of the IAF on these issues and its interactions with other HC members in relation to them, she further revealed significant limitations in IAF willingness to bring sensitive issues, particularly those related to *shari'a* law, to the HC for potential discussion, raising doubts about the relationship between cross-party cooperation and IAF moderation.

- *Honor Crimes*: According to Clark, four different laws address a man's right to "cleanse" his family's honor by killing or injuring a female relative and her partner engaged in "unlawful" sexual transgressions. Legislative efforts to overturn these laws were defeated four times by Jordan's elected lower house of parliament after being approved by the appointed upper house, although the cabinet approved a temporary amendment to one of the laws—Law 340—in December 2001 when parliament was suspended. Clark noted that while the IAF opposed honor crimes as "un-Islamic," they also opposed the amendment to Law 340 introducing tougher punishments for adulterers because clear penalties for adultery are specified in *shari'a* law. Even though the IAF had concerns about various aspects of the four laws regulating honor crimes that were similar to views held by some secular lawyers and human rights activists, Clark argued that the IAF was not interested in engaging with others opposed to the amendment because the IAF's views were based on religious objections while other opponents' concerns were of a secular nature.
- *Divorce Law*: The second case cited by Clark addressed an amendment in divorce law—namely, the right of women to ask for divorce on demand without evidence of maltreatment, abandonment, etc. It was passed by the cabinet as a temporary law in 2001 after parliament was suspended. Clark noted that, similar to the amendment to the honor crime law, it was twice defeated in the lower house of parliament with the help of the IAF, despite the fact that it was supported by Chief Islamic Justice Sheikh Tamimi, the king's adviser on Islamic affairs. Clark indicated that the IAF, in fact, supported women's right to divorce but opposed the divorce procedures as "un-Islamic" because the new law removed the role of the judge.
- *Quota for Women*: The third case cited by Clark dealt with the quota for women in parliament, which arose out of a context in which women won no seats in the first elections in 1989, 1 seat in the 1993 elections, and none in the 1997 elections. Clark indicated that in 2003 the cabinet passed a temporary law granting women 6 out of 110 seats in parliament—alongside quotas for Christians (9 seats), Circassians and Chechens (3 seats), and Bedouins (6 seats). The IAF opposed the quota for women arguing, said Clark, "that women are not a minority [and] the quota was unconstitutional as the constitution gives equality between women and men."

What Clark found interesting about the three cases is that while the IAF opposed all three amendments and would have found support for its position among certain members of the HC, they cooperated with the HC only on one—the quota for women. She argued that "of the three cases, the quota stands out in that there is no specific religious injunction regarding quotas. And it is precisely because of this that the quota was the only issue discussed by the HC for possible cooperation." Clark asked, "Why did other members of the Higher Committee also not raise the issue of honor crimes or khula [divorce on demand] for possible discussion?" She concluded that "the Higher Committee simply does not discuss controversial issues upon which members recognize there will be dissent."

In short, Clark indicated that her study of the HC suggests that "cross-ideological interactions per se cannot be said to lead to the increased tolerance and moderation of Islamist parties and, as a result, a deepening of the democratization process." "Cooperation, as practiced by the Higher Committee," she concluded, "is largely a matter of coordination between parties over issues on which there are established, shared interests. It is not a cooperation that involves compromise or the 'give and take' inherent to the spirit of tolerance." While

cooperation between the IAF and other members of the HC extended over a wide array of issues, it did not occur on issues with a "direct bearing upon *shari'a* [law]." Moreover, because the IAF is by far the largest party in the HC, issues which the IAF was unwilling to discuss with other members simply were not raised. Clark noted that "Rarely is a memo of protest sent [by the HC] to the government if the IAF is not a signatory." She added, "Higher Committee members avoid issues related to *sharifa*, recognizing their inability to find a common ground between the Islamists and the secularists."

In response to a question about why the IAF should bother to participate in the HC and coordinate or compromise with other HC members when real power resides in the regime, Clark indicated that the IAF leaders have indicated a desire to join their voices to those of other political parties—even very weak ones—to show that "all parties are in this together against the state."

The Turkish Case: A "Pro-Islamic" Party in Power

The role of Islam in politics looks very different in Turkey. The "pro-Islamic" Justice and Development Party (JDP) came to power in the 2002 elections on the heels of an economic crisis and without significant opposition. Professor Sultan Tepe presented material on the ideology and performance of the JDP, which she characterized as having the "task of defining the terms of new Islamic politics in Turkey."

The JDP's Three Dilemmas

Tepe argued that the JDP faces three central dilemmas, the first of which relates to defining its identity. Although observers outside Turkey commonly refer to the JDP as an "Islamist" party, that term does not fully explain the complexity of the JDP's identity or distinguish it adequately from Islamist parties in Egypt, Kuwait, Jordan, and elsewhere.

Tepe pointed out that political apathy, electoral rules, and the demise of secular parties play an important role in the success of Islamist parties. Three factors need to be taken into account in the assessment of the JDP's electoral success: (1) the increasing apathy of the Turkish electorate (in the 2002 election 20 percent of eligible voters did not cast ballots); (2) the 10 percent national threshold rule in Turkey that leaves supporters of small parties garnering less than 10 percent of the vote unrepresented in parliament (more than 40 percent of the votes cast in the 2002 election); and (3) the leadership and ideological conflicts marking the secular parties of the left and the right, which mired these parties in controversy in the 2002 election and left the JDP without meaningful or effective political opposition.

According to Tepe, the JDP's leadership maintains that its primary goal is to "glimit the gap between the state and the public and integrate the common values of Turkish society into the policies of the Turkish state." Tepe noted that "Islam is explicitly mentioned in Conservative Democracy, the party's statement of ideology, only in the section that discusses whether Islam and democracy are compatible with each other. Conservative Democracy concludes that they are not in conflict." It specifically states, "Although religion is sacred, religious ideas are not sacred, and there can be more than one idea in the public sphere. Therefore pluralism is acceptable. Experiments, and trial and error learning, are acceptable not only in the natural sciences but also in the social sciences. Therefore these social inventions are acceptable to religion."

Tepe argued that "while the JDP's roots are that of a pro-Islamic party, it tries to distance itself from the Islamists and goes to the other extreme, presenting itself as an almost un-Islamic party. Instead of bringing Islamic ideas into the marketplace of ideas the party either subsumes them under the ecommon values label or shows that democratic principles can be deduced from them." In coining its ideology gconservative democracy," the JDP presents this largely undefined concept as the gideological anchorh for its policies. According to Tepe, this ideological elusiveness may prevent the party's successful development.

The JDP's second dilemma, Tepe argued, gresults from its commitment to introduce institutional reforms swiftly, as a way to limit the statefs role, decentralize political power, and improve the free market economy." Indeed, the party's legislative record is impressive; according to Tepe, under the JDP the government has enacted a grecord high number of bills (553) . . . preparing the way for entry into the EU." The dilemma, however, is that most of these radical reforms have been adopted rapidly with little or no public debate, even though many provisions raise important questions. For instance, some reforms were meant to limit the role of the state, yet, according to Tepe, they have the potential of gactually strengthening it even further." Paradoxically, said Tepe, "While the JDP aggressively seeks to transform Turkey's centralized state structure into eadministrative federalismf, it has adopted a policy of centralization in its party organization, and is excluding dissenters and civil society from the policymaking process." The mode of politics adopted by the party brings to

mind Ghassan Salamefs phrase (and book title), "democracy without democrats." Tepe said, "The party seeks to secure the institutional foundation of a democratic society without permitting individuals in its party and outside of it to play an active role in this transformation."

The JDP's third dilemma, according to Tepe, "concerns the party's conviction that selective reforms will create a domino effect that will resolve controversial issues automatically." The party believes that important issues pertaining to the public role of Islam can be addressed more effectively after the reforms have curbed the power of the state and removed the restrictions on Turkey's public sphere. Tepe cited the controversial ban on Islamic headscarves (turbans) in public institutions—such as parliament and schools—a policy that predates the JDP's rise to power. One might assume that the JDP would be interested in addressing this issue directly, which it has not done. Instead, Tepe argued, the JDP has relied on civil-society organizations and international institutions for the solution of controversial issues. In the case of headscarves, Tepe said that the "European Court of Human Rights recently decided to endorse Turkey's current headscarf policy. Contrary to the belief of the JDP elite that the court would revoke the ban on turbans, the court concluded: 'Measures taken in universities to prevent certain fundamentalist religious movements from pressuring students who do not practice the religion in question, or those belonging to another religion, can be justified.'" Tepe argued that "the decision shattered one of the major components of the JDP's approach to the turban issue."

This gap between the party's rhetorical commitment and actual practice also manifests itself in the party's failure to promote the participation of women in political life. Tepe noted that in the 2004 local elections, only sixteen of the JDP's 3,184 candidates for local leadership positions were female and only one woman won office." This failure, Tepe suggested, grew out of the party's "election driven approach, based on a multilayered selection process (including local popularity pools, references from the party organization, and interviews by the party center). The overall process reinforces the power of popular, traditional leaders, which, in effect, blocks the advance of female candidates."

Fear of weakening the JDP's power and its exhaustive reform agenda has silenced the debate on headscarves and other controversial issues that existed among Islamists before the JDP came to power. According to Tepe, "The fear that outspoken women's groups will undermine the JDP's power generates a form of self-censorship among female supporters." The result, Tepe, suggested, is a process of politics without politics and politics of Islam without Islam"—that is to say, a policymaking process without the competition of ideas, negotiations, or compromises in which Islamic issues are treated as derivative of other issues.

The ability of the JDP to forge a novel pro-Islamic and democratic platform, according to Tepe, will depend on whether the party successfully "articulates a clear ideology without being elusive; translates its commitment to the procedures and ideals of democracy to the actual practice of liberal democracy; questions its reductionist approach which sees the root of all problems, including those derived from the public role of Islam, in the ineffective state structure and weak liberal economy; constructs policy solutions to controversial issues by addressing differences and incorporating views of competing social groups." If it does not accomplish these tasks, Tepe concluded, "the JDP will [just] be another center right party that failed in its attempts to include Islam in Turkey's public sphere and serve as a model for other Islamist parties."

Considering the Cases Altogether

Professor Brumberg proposed three responses to the presentations. First, the inclusion of Islamist parties in democratic political change remains a tremendous challenge because their agendas are fundamentally different from those of secular political parties. In the Arab world, the way this challenge has been handled by semiauthoritarian regimes is to allow political liberalization without democracy. Political parties, including Islamist parties, seek patrons within the state, and participation in politics resembles lobbying more than it does direct representation of political interests. In such systems of state-managed political liberalization, according to Brumberg, "nobody wins and nobody loses." For that reason, it is difficult to measure Islamist party commitment to democratic values because no party is ever really allowed to exercise real political authority. The extraordinary paradox of politics in the Arab Middle East, he said, is that state monopolization of political power prevents the development of democratic systems in which Islamist parties, such as the IAF, could win control through elections and impose their agendas without regard to the rights of others.

Brumberg's second observation was that preoccupation, especially in the West, with how to update, reform, or fix Islam misses a more fundamental need. What counts most in regulating the behavior of Islamist parties, he argued, are the constraints and opportunities operating on those parties. In the Arab world, Islamist parties are vying for power in systems in which non-Islamic parties—other than those controlled by the regime—have no

significant presence or voice. This lack of serious secular political-party alternatives to Islamist parties suggests that Islamist parties will have fewer incentives to moderate their politics.

A third and related point made by Brumberg focused on the advantages and disadvantages inherent in the Turkish case, in which non-Islamic political forces have enjoyed organized support for many years. Islamists in Turkey know that secular political parties present the electorate with serious non-Islamic alternatives. The JDP feels the pressure, moreover, of an export-oriented Turkish bourgeoisie, including members of the JDP itself, which has a keen interest in the development of Turkish democracy and its linkage to Turkey's accession to the European Union. The existence of this interest in Turkey generates deep contradictions within the JDP, whose more religiously conservative supporters feel it is insufficiently "Islamic." The Turkish example of a relatively moderate Islamist party—the JDP—that operates within a competitive political system provides a useful example for the Arab world, Brumberg argued. The main challenge for Arab societies, he concluded, is to create political arenas in which Islamists participate but are constrained by the need to compete with secular political parties and thus moderate their positions in order to maintain their popularity.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- Islamist political parties in the Middle East are diverse in nature, as are the systems in which they operate.
- Much of the existing literature equates the notion of "moderation" with "growing support for democracy" by Islamist parties. In fact, there is good evidence that the more conservative Islamist parties embrace procedural aspects of democracy while rejecting the liberal values that go with it.
- To better assess whether Islamist parties endorse democracy or not depends, in part, on whether the definition of democracy goes beyond the minimalist interpretation of democracy as participation in elections. When the definition includes protection of individual rights and liberties, it becomes clear that some Islamist parties do not support democracy because they endorse a reduced version of political freedom—namely, freedom from the state at the expense of the exercise of broader liberties within civil society.
- Mere participation in elections is insufficient to motivate parties to liberalize their party platforms and agendas. Moreover, conservative Islamist parties in Egypt and Jordan cooperate and sometimes have joined forces with secular and even progressive political forces and parties to voice joint opposition to government policies. But there is little evidence that participation in elections or interaction between the secular parties and mainstream conservative Islamist parties in Egypt, Jordan, and Kuwait (the MB, the IAF, and the ICM, respectively) has caused the Islamist parties to compromise on issues that have direct bearing on sharia law.
- If these conservative Islamist parties were to come to power tomorrow, the translation of their current views into public policy would pose risks to equal citizenship not only for women but also for minorities and secular Muslims with dissenting views.
- In contrast, new, breakaway Islamist parties—such as the Wasat Parties in Jordan and Egypt—have a more liberal orientation and are more inclined to promote *ijtihad* (reinterpretation of Islamic law in relation to current circumstances). Unlike the more conservative Islamist parties, which sometimes cooperate with secular parties to express opposition to government policies, the more liberal Islamist parties have modified their positions on *shari'a* law issues in a process aided by interaction with secular parties and forces.
- The structural circumstances in which Islamist parties compete for support significantly affect outcomes. Electoral systems in the Arab region have been designed by semiauthoritarian regimes to permit political liberalization but prevent the emergence of fully democratic governments. The ability of secular as well as religious parties to mobilize support has been affected by these constraints. Generally speaking, however, the organizational power and outreach of the secular parties does not compare favorably to that of the Islamist parties, which can draw upon vast networks of religious institutions.
- The situation is different in Turkey, where an Islamist party—the JDP—is in power but is mindful of competition from well-established secular political parties. In an effort to appeal to a broader constituency and to promote the accession of Turkey to the European Union—a matter of paramount importance to Turkey's export-oriented bourgeoisie—the JDP has declined to take strong positions on sensitive political issues of importance to its core constituency, such as the wearing of Islamic head-

scarves.

- The absence of strong secular political parties in Egypt, Jordan, and Kuwait means that conservative Islamist parties are less likely to modify their positions on core issues than they would if they were forced to compete with strong, more liberal secular parties, as they do in Turkey.
- A central paradox of the politics of the Arab Middle East is that state monopolization of political power prevents the development of democratic systems in which conservative Islamist parties could win control through elections and impose their agendas without regard to the rights of others. The main challenge for the region is to create political arenas in which Islamists are able to participate but are also constrained by the need to compete with secular political parties, compelling them to moderate their positions to maintain their popularity.

About the Report

On April 12, 2005, the United States Institute of Peace's [Grant Program](#) organized a roundtable discussion featuring three Institute grantees who had conducted research in the Middle East on the role and impact of Islamist parties. This report summarizes their presentations. The three grantees—Professor Janine Astrid Clark (University of Guelph, Ontario), Professor Sultan Tepe (University of Illinois, Chicago), and Professor Carrie Rosefsky Wickham (Emory University, Atlanta)—were joined at the roundtable by discussant [Daniel Brumberg](#), a professor at Georgetown University and special consultant to the Institute's [Muslim World Initiative](#). [Judy Barsalou](#), the Institute's vice president for Grants, moderated the discussion and prepared this report.

The views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect views of the United States Institute of Peace, which does not advocate specific policy positions.

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