

**Middle East
Series**

CARNEGIE
P A P E R S

**ISLAMISTS
IN THE ARAB
WORLD: THE
DANCE AROUND
DEMOCRACY**

Graham E. Fuller

**Democracy and Rule
of Law Project**



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ARE ISLAM AND DEMOCRACY COMPATIBLE? And are Islamists willing to accept a democratic order and work within it? Debate has swirled around these two grand questions for decades and has produced a broad variety of responses, often quite polarized. Whatever we may think about Islamists, the topic matters vitally because in the Middle East today they have few serious ideological rivals in leading opposition movements against a falling status quo. These Islamist movements are characterized by rapid growth, evolution, change, and diversification. In the Arab world the only ideological competition comes from Arab nationalism, the left, and liberal democracy, in diminishing order of size and importance. More significantly, since the Al Qaeda attacks of September 11, 2001, and the declaration of the Bush administration's war on terrorism, Arab nationalists and the left increasingly share a common cause with the Islamists in the face of growing political confrontation with the United States. This rising hostility shows no abatement as yet and permits political Islam (Islamism) to gain ever greater ground.

This essay will argue that democracy and political Islam are potentially quite compatible in principle, and the record indicates as much. I am optimistic about the long-term strength of this trend. Yet real world events damage the practice of such compatibility; the present anger and increasing radicalization of a Muslim world that feels itself under siege is creating a highly negative environment that is not conducive to the emergence of Islamist moderates—indeed for moderates of any stripe. Ultimately, this relationship between democracy and political Islam will not work itself out in the abstract but in the real world. Its actual character on the ground will depend on some concrete variables: country, time, given personalities, local political cultures, and ambient regional and global politics.

First we need to define terms. What is an Islamist? I define the term broadly—in keeping with the reality of the phenomenon: An Islamist is anyone who believes that the Koran and the Hadith (traditions of the Prophet's life, actions, and words) contain important principles about Muslim governance and society, and who tries to implement these principles in some way. This definition embraces a broad spectrum that includes both radical and moderate, violent and peaceful, traditional and modern, democratic and antidemocratic. At one extreme it includes Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda; on the other, the ruling moderate Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Turkey, which seeks membership in the European Union and cooperates with Washington on key aspects of regional politics. The moderate side of the spectrum vastly outweighs the more dangerous, violent and radical segment, yet it is these latter radical forces that constitute the focus of most governments and the media. Islamism also includes *fundamentalist* views (literalist, narrow, intolerant) but does not equate with it. If we are to understand the long-term issues of Islamism and democracy, we need to look at both “good” Islamists (from the viewpoint of Western policy makers) as well as the “bad.” There is an ongoing struggle among them.

ISLAM VERSUS DEMOCRACY: THE THEORETICAL ARGUMENT

The debate about the compatibility between Islam and democracy is perhaps the most passionate at the theoretical level—and probably the least important. Some Western scholars examine the Koran and Islamic law and tradition to textually “demonstrate” that Islam is not compatible with democracy. Ironically, their views are bolstered by *radical Islamists* in the Muslim world who similarly argue the incompatibility of these two concepts. The essence of the radical argument rests on the divine source of Islamic law: If God has revealed clear principles of what is to be encouraged and what is to be proscribed, then human desire and man-made law have no place in tampering with these prescriptions and prohibitions. (In a simple example, if Islam has clearly banned the consumption of alcohol, then in an Islamic state no democratic leader or elected parliament has the right to decide that beer is acceptable.) Many fundamentalists argue further that “all of life” is about religion, thus making it theoretically impossible to delink Islam from any aspect of society, life, or even governance. Because the state has the primary role in shaping human society, the argument goes, it is imperative that the state be based strictly on Islamic principles to mold an Islamic society, informed first and foremost by religion. In this more radical vision, religion and state are inextricably linked; the sole proper form of government is only rule by just and wise Islamic scholars and not by the uninformed masses. But most Muslims do not agree with this theoretical incompatibility.

But the question, then, is really not only about Islam but about whether *any* revealed religion is compatible with democracy: All have authoritarian bases, are patriarchal, have no democratic foundation, are dogmatic about what constitutes the truth, and do not believe that reason can bring one to God. But the *theory* of incompatibility is belied by reality. Both Protestant and Catholic states in the West, by different paths, have evolved forms of democratic practice that defy any theoretical considerations. In most cases this compromise between ideology and practice has been facilitated by social contract over the extent of public religious authority exercised within a society.

The same process applies to Islam. We are talking here in the end not about what Islam *is*, but about what Muslims *want*. If the course of Muslim political evolution inspires Muslims today to live under democracy—to be able to get rid of bad rulers and have a voice in their own governance—then they will call for democracy, as most in fact do. This reality will define the relationship between “Islam” and democracy.

Even on a theoretical basis, few Muslims see a contradiction between the two values. Some fundamentalists will argue simplistically that in Islam sovereignty comes from God, whereas in democracy it comes from human beings. (U.S. Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia, too, has commented that ultimate sovereignty comes from God.) On this basis, many fundamentalists will argue that human beings cannot pass legislation that infringes on the moral principles of Islam and its traditions: In short, human beings cannot “make law.” But even here, modernist Muslims can comfortably agree that all sovereignty derives from God but still point out that Islam does not specify in any way what form the state should take. God furthermore gave humanity the power of reason with which to formulate public policy. The state, even the Islamic state, must still be constructed in conformity with human understanding of how Islam translates into practice and institutions—a process always open to debate and new interpretation over time. In the end, then, dicta about what is or is not permissible within Islamist thinking are strictly theoretical; supposed contradictions are belied by the facts on the ground and the actual *experience* of Muslims with democracy.

THE ARAB EXPERIENCE WITH DEMOCRACY

To date no Arab state, with the possible exception of Lebanon, qualifies as “democratic”—defined by the ability to change the ruling authority through elections. Advances in democracy in the broader Muslim world have occurred primarily in the non-Arab states of Indonesia, Malaysia, and Turkey, and to a lesser extent in Pakistan, Bangladesh, and even Iran. Nonetheless some Arab states are moving in encouraging directions, including Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, and Yemen. But in no Arab country except Lebanon are heads of state and government (presidents, prime ministers) chosen by honest popular elections. Nearly all Arab states now possess pro forma parliaments, but few of them wield any significant power or are able to overturn decisions by an unelected executive. Saudi Arabia actually challenges outright the appropriateness of democracy for Muslims, dismisses democracy as non-Islamic, and claims that its own system is based on the Koran. Yet even the Kingdom has been obliged to inch toward broadening the representative nature of its Consultative Assembly, still largely appointed.

Genuine political parties in the Arab world are generally either absent from the political scene or else severely constrained by the state. In nearly all Arab countries, “ruling parties” dominate the scene and only permit token representation of selected other parties as long as they do not seriously challenge the existing order. The role of any “opposition” is almost invariably a negotiated process between the ruler and the given party as to how much power and latitude it will be given at any one time.

Why in fact is democracy so weak in the Arab world? The development of democracy there compares unfavorably to all other regions of the world except Africa. This reality prompts some observers to provide a simplistic religious explanation for the phenomenon: Islam is “authoritarian” in character and thus hostile to the emergence of democratic societies. Such a sweeping generalization is belied by the past authoritarian nature of nearly all religions and requires far more detailed and concrete arguments about the nature of political culture in the Arab world. But to what then do we attribute this weak democratic development in Arab states, if not to Islam? Failure to diagnose the problem accurately means near certain failure in finding the correct prescription for a remedy. Some of the following factors must rank high in diagnosing problems of the Arab world in developing more democratic orders.

- *Oil.* Oil-producing states in the developing world share particularly poor records in developing democracy, for quite concrete reasons. Large oil revenues inhibit the development of democracy because the state “graciously and generously” distributes oil largesse to a “grateful” public that can make only limited demands on the paternalistic state in return. Conversely, when public taxation provides the fiscal basis for the maintenance of government, people traditionally quickly demand a voice: “No taxation without representation” and hence, “there can be no representation without taxation.”
- *Income Levels.* The low per capita income levels of *non-oil* Arab states, a fact that is typically uncongenial to democracy everywhere.
- *Nature of the Arab State.* The largely arbitrary and “artificial” nature of the modern Arab state and its borders, drawn by colonial powers, has tended to diminish the legitimacy and sovereignty of the individual Arab state. Furthermore, the nearly unique existence of an “Arab world”—where else does such a “world” exist?—weakens the identity of individual Arab

states. With a broadly shared culture and language, Arabs tend to feel that developments within other Arab states directly affect their own local interests and hence give them a right to a voice, or even interference, in affairs across borders of the greater "Arab nation." Popular identification with the local state has been arguably weaker than in many other parts of the world—sub-Saharan Africa excepted—thus weakening the legitimacy of state structures and evolution of the democratic process. The ideal of pan-Arabism weakens commitment to local autonomy.

- *Arab-Israeli Tensions.* The creation of the state of Israel on Palestinian soil came at a time when most Arab states themselves were just gaining their own independence. The quick Arab rejection of the new Israeli state and subsequent wars and Arab defeats have encouraged the development of military regimes and security-focused states that are readily exploited by dictators.

- *Geography.* The location of the Arab world on a central East-West axis and the geopolitical reality of over half of the world's oil reserves have made the Middle East a key focus of European colonialism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Struggles between Arab states and colonial powers for control over their oil and its pricing have led to frequent Western military intervention that is still ongoing. These conditions and continuing regional tensions have not been conducive to democratic development.

- *Long-time Western Support for "Friendly Tyrants" in the Middle East.* This phenomenon began with the Cold War and systematically weakened democratic forces within the region—and elsewhere in the Third World as well. After the end of the Cold War, the emergence of international terrorism and the Bush administration's war on terrorism have continued to favor the maintenance of "friendly" authoritarian regimes. The Bush administration's call for democratization invariably takes a back seat to security considerations, perpetuating tolerance for cooperative dictators who are supportive of the war on terrorism.

- *Islamism.* The increasing emergence of Islamist movements over the past few decades as the primary opposition to Middle East autocracy has further discouraged the West from pressing the democratic agenda there. Arab dictators facing rising opposition from their own peoples regularly peddle to Washington fear of Islamist victories at the polls to discourage support for democracy among Western powers.

The factors cited above offer significant alternative explanations for the present weakness of democracy in the Arab world. But they still amount to a broader argument that specific cultural and historical reasons in the Arab world—both internally and externally generated—have created a contemporary Arab political culture that complicates democratization at this stage of development.

THE EVOLUTION OF ISLAMIST THOUGHT

Despite the historical obstacles to quick evolution of democracy in the Arab world, the region has seen considerable political evolution over the past few decades, most notably in the emergence and evolution of political Islam. Islamists have particularly shifted in their view of democracy over the past half century. For a long time, democracy was discredited on several grounds. First, it was

perceived as a Western, indeed colonial, importation that had no roots in the Arab world. It was propounded mainly by a small group of Westernizers, a tiny elite who lacked broad acceptability in society and were seen to be linked to colonial and Western values in ways that threatened Muslim culture. It was an "alien" importation suspected of furthering the designs of imperial powers.

But political thought in Islam has long been aware of the requirement for good governance, particularly defined over the centuries as the need for *just* governance. Since few rulers anywhere in the world until recent centuries derived their legitimacy from an electoral process, in Islam rulers derived legitimacy, at least in the eyes of the clerics (*ulama*), primarily through the rulers' attentiveness to application of Islamic law and implementation of justice on the social level. But if rulers turned out not to be just or Islamically legitimate, there were no legal mechanisms for getting rid of them.

The problem was compounded when jurisprudential authority during the chaos and destruction of the Mongol invasions propounded the concept that even unjust rule was preferable to chaos and anarchy. This legal opinion has comfortably served autocrats well ever since, because it provides virtual de facto sanction for tyranny. These theories have not prevented Muslims, just like people in other parts of the world, from engaging in periodic revolts against oppressive rulers. Interestingly, mainstream Islamists in the twentieth century were the first to widely break with the clerical concept that "oppression is preferable to anarchy" and to demand that rulers must indeed be just and good Muslims, free of corruption or misrule. In this new view, if rulers failed to deliver justice, they could and should be legitimately overthrown—a near Jeffersonian vision that the tyrannical state should be resisted, even by force. As a result, Islamists have developed new regard for some aspects of Western democratic practice that include checks and balances and instrumentalities for getting rid of unwanted and illegitimate rulers.

How far does the Islamists' embrace of democratic principles go? For several decades Islamists across the Muslim world have been steadily moving toward acceptance of the concept of democracy, at least in principle. The rationale has little to do with convoluted arguments about the source of sovereignty, or whether democracy is an alien Western institution. Islamist appreciation for the values of a democratic order has been most strengthened by the very reality that they themselves would be among the primary beneficiaries of it. The same goes for their growing support for concepts of human rights: Even non-violent Islamists are now the primary victims of arbitrary authoritarian rule and extralegal punishment by the state (arrests, persecution, and execution). And as Islamists have assumed the role of the major opposition movement in most Arab states, the greater becomes the attraction of democracy that would likely grant them a dominant voice in initial elections.

Would Islamists still embrace democratization and human rights if they did not see themselves as the primary beneficiaries? This is a valid question, since much of this more recent Islamist appreciation for democracy is based primarily on pragmatic reasons. But why should not pragmatic thinking be desirable? Pragmatism, for example, has led to clear long-term political change in the thinking of the Muslim Brotherhood across most of the Arab world. (Yet even here the conversion is not complete: There is the disturbing case of Sudan, where in 1989 the Brotherhood participated in a military coup against a semidemocratic regime because it believed it could not win power by democratic means. The Brotherhood is still the key element of an authoritarian order in Sudan today.)

Caution is thus in order in evaluating the new-found Islamist enthusiasm for democracy. First, Islamists *in power* in the Muslim world—in Sudan, Iran, and the Taliban's Afghanistan—so far have not shown serious commitment to democracy, although Iran has shown encouraging progress in holding honest elections, even while circumscribing the kinds of candidates permitted to run. Even Sudan is groping its way toward greater opening with some of the former opposition parties, even while terrible human rights abuses that have been endemic to the country for decades continue in other areas. In these cases, Islamists behave in patterns typical of most regimes across the Muslim world: They are reluctant to give up power once they have attained it.

A more important reality, however, is that in all three of these cases, Islamists came to power via nondemocratic processes—revolution, military coup, and civil war, respectively. *Any* party that gains power by these means is unlikely to open up the system to greater democracy. The real test of Islamist commitment to democracy comes when they win power through democratic elections and then face the prospect of loss in future elections. In the Arab world there is no democratic precedent as yet—the old fear about Islamists supporting only “one man, one vote, one time” style elections has never actually happened in the Islamist experience because Islamists have not really been permitted to participate fully or win in open elections. The real question about whether Islamists are ready to win—and lose—elections has less to do with Islam and more to do with the political culture of the given country in question. Where democratic concepts and practice have some historical roots or track record, the chances are good that Islamists—indeed any political party—will honor constitutional precepts and accept defeat as well as victory. I have great confidence, for example, that the present ruling Islamists in Turkey will relinquish power constitutionally when at some point they lose an election, because Turkish democratic culture by now is quite advanced and has taken root. However, in states such as Algeria that have no tradition of democratic practice, there is no guarantee that if Islamists—or any other political party—win a legitimate electoral victory that they would hold subsequent elections or agree to leave power upon losing such an election.

CONFRONTING STRATEGIC DILEMMAS

As Islamists gain opportunities to move into the political arena with greater freedom, they face key strategic choices involving dilemmas of choosing between principles and the use of power.

Play the Political Game, or Resort to Violence?

Islamists first need to decide whether they want to enter the political process at all. Many Western political commentators emphasize that if allowed to enter the system, Islamists (or any other opposition) must play by the “rules of the game.” But the rules of the game in Arab countries are generally structured by design by authoritarian regimes to weaken and marginalize all opposition. (Such methods include holding presidential referendums in place of elections, dishonest elections, arbitrary barring of religiously based parties when they constitute the primary opposition, arrest of leading Islamist figures on the eve of elections, other forms of individual electoral disarmament, gerrymandering of electoral districts, state control of media, and government denial of airtime to opposition elements on government-controlled radio and TV to promote platforms.) These processes are widespread in Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, and other states that make some claim to

adoption of democratic processes. Under such conditions, the "rules of the game" are themselves the problem and are not seen as acceptable by the marginalized opposition.

As a result, some radical movements have rejected the state outright and adopted violence or armed struggle against it, particularly in Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen.

In Egypt, two dangerous Islamist terrorist organizations emerged in the 1980s: Islamic Societies (*al-Jamā'at al-Islamiyya*) and Islamic Jihad (*al-Jihad al-Islami*). These movements have by now been almost completely eliminated by state security organizations, at least for the interim, and their leadership has subsequently renounced violence as a political tool inappropriate to Islam. Some of these conversions to "true, nonviolent" Islam may be viewed with some skepticism because they took place within prison walls where the logic of the state's theological arguments no doubt carries greater weight. But such movements may also in fact have recognized that they cannot defeat the state at this juncture and that renunciation of violence is the wiser path. For some radical Islamists, then, the change of heart may be quite sincere as they gain experience and confront reality. But given the huge political tensions within a state such as Egypt, the reasonable likelihood of political explosion, the rising regional polarization, and the ongoing discrediting of all authoritarian leadership, we cannot rule out the possibility that remnants of these earlier movements may once again adopt violence as a way to combat the state, especially should it show signs of tottering. In Libya and Saudi Arabia, it is even more likely that Islamists will turn to violence, because they do not have a democratic option in the first place.

The Reopening of Armed Violence

If the repressive powers of the authoritarian state had generally prevailed in the struggle against most violent Islamists before 9/11, the events of 9/11 may have regrettably reopened the path to violence. The Bush administration's subsequent war on terrorism and the prolonged violence of the U.S. war in Iraq have revived movements of violence in an expanded armed struggle against the American presence in the Middle East. Arab regimes that support that presence have likewise become new targets. This reemergence of regional violence undoubtedly stems in the first instance from the activities of Al Qaeda and the U.S. military response to it. The spread of regional violence unfortunately has greatly strengthened the voice of the radicals against the moderates, especially when the moderates seemingly cannot demonstrate that their peaceful path has borne fruit and when the Arab homeland seems to be under a state of siege, radicalizing the general population against both the United States and compliant Arab regimes.

Violence of course need not be the only path to rejection of the existing political order. Several movements have adopted (generally) nonviolent and nonpolitical means. Typical of this phenomenon is *al-Takfir wa'l-Hijra*, literally the denunciation of existing political society as non-Islamic (*kafr*) and the search for refuge from it, in the form of underground organization. Similarly, the Liberation Party (*Hisb al-Tahrir*), a radical movement, has spread outside its original base in Palestine to become a major nonviolent underground force in Central Asia and other Muslim locales. Many Wahhabi (*Tawhid*) organizations likewise propagate a radical analysis of the ills of the Arab and Muslim world and call for a change in the political order, even when not engaging in violence. All these groups denounce existing political orders as Islamically illegitimate and call for adoption of strict Islamic (*Sharia*) law and noncooperation with the West as the only way to revitalize the moral

underpinnings of the Arab world and set it on a path of renewed legitimacy and power. These groups see a change in public attitudes and values as a necessary prelude to any political change.

Before 9/11 most Islamist organizations in the Arab world had seemingly accepted the futility and even error of engaging in armed struggle, but the radicalizing tensions of the post-9/11 Middle East have rekindled this debate, at least in the short to medium term, with unpredictable impact on the longer range evolution of many Islamist movements.

Movements versus Parties

Political participation by definition requires compromise. If a movement possesses clearly established political and religious values, is it appropriate to compromise those values by cooperation with other political movements whose values might be quite alien? And if the rules of the game, as noted above, are skewed or unfair, is there any value in cooperating with an unjust political order for marginal gain? The virtue of a *movement*, as opposed to a party, is that it can espouse its moral and political values without working with the regime, without compromising its own principles. Many Islamists have argued further that it is nearly impossible to change the political order without first changing the ideas, values, and attitudes of society itself. If a transition in public values and understanding has not taken place, then even a popular Islamist party faces the issue of whether to try to *impose* its views on the public—at some risk if the public is not ready. Indeed, one major Islamist thinker, Shaykh Rashid al-Ghannushi of Tunisia, living in exile in London, has famously commented that “the most dangerous thing is for the Islamists to be loved by the people before they get to power and then hated afterwards.”¹ Such is precisely the case in Iran today, for example, where political Islam has become synonymous with a repressive state order, leading the people to “hate” Islam when it becomes the justification for regime oppression.

Yet in the end, the temptations of competing in the political order as a political party have proven irresistible for most Islamists, even when the rules of the game are perceived as unfair. Power is perceived as the ultimate instrument of change. The state itself is the prize, however used to fulfill political goals.

As a result, most Islamist movements in the Arab world have opted to move in the direction of establishing political parties where permitted. The most important case in point is the Muslim Brotherhood, the oldest, most important, and most influential of all Islamist movements. The Brotherhood led the way with the establishment of political parties in most Arab countries, under a variety of different names. The Brotherhood in Jordan, for example, has cooperated for decades with the throne, at one point providing a valuable counterweight to the power of radical Arab nationalist parties in the 1960s. The Brotherhood is active in Egypt as well (the seat of the original movement and still its unofficial headquarters). It has contested elections regularly in Algeria since the Algerian political order was partially opened in 1991 and where it was viewed by the regime as a moderate force compared with the largest and slightly more radical umbrella organization, the Islamic Salvation Front. Parties linked with the Brotherhood are also legally active in politics in Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, and Yemen. It remains as a movement in other Arab states where political parties are banned. It is permitted to exist as a movement in Egypt but is not allowed to form an official party—although Brotherhood members are sometimes permitted to run on the slate of other parties and win seats in the very tame and controlled parliament. The Brotherhood is

banned outright in Syria and Tunisia, but it is allowed to function as a movement under very close supervision in Saudi Arabia. It has reemerged strongly in Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussein.

In all of these states the Muslim Brotherhood has demonstrated a willingness to work with other parties toward common goals, even with communist parties whose ideology is anathema to its values. The Brotherhood works increasingly more closely with Arab nationalists and liberals on two key shared goals: liberalization of regimes in all Arab countries (which would strengthen the Brotherhood at the polls), and an “anti-imperialist” agenda of opposing American interventionist policies in the Muslim world. Ironically, the heightened anti-Americanism across a wide spectrum of the Arab world is likely to help integrate the Islamists into the mainstream of Arab politics and to diminish their differences with other major ideological trends. Although this is not good news for current U.S. policy in the region, it suggests that all but the most radical and violent Islamists will gain the practical experience of compromise on national goals. This experience is serving to move Islamists away from doctrinaire or pseudo-theological approaches to political problems. In short, even though the whole Arab world is moving toward greater radicalism and anti-Americanism, Islamist parties are entering the system more vigorously in nearly every country and becoming part of that new mainstream. Anti-Americanism facilitates the integration of Islamism everywhere.

DIVERSIFICATION OF ISLAMIST PARTIES

State repression of Islamist movements and parties over past decades pushed them toward a certain sense of solidarity with one another and avoidance of mutual public criticism. But that reality is changing as movements expand and diversify, producing a far healthier phenomenon of more open debate and rivalry among them. Some Islamist parties have tried to put themselves beyond criticism by assuming conspicuously religious names linked to God or the Prophet, a practice denounced by secularists as arrogant and dangerous: How could a party with the name of Party of God (*Hizballah*) be beyond political criticism or attack? How can a specific political party speak in the name of God? Today, there are not only several Parties of God, but several Islamic jihads, an Army of Muhammad (*Jaysh Muhammad*), Troops of God (*Jund Allah*), Partisans of Islam (*Ansar al-Islam*), and others of similar ilk. By becoming commonplace, religiously freighted names such as these are actually fittering away their religious impact. And with the multiplication of Islamist parties, debate and rivalry among them has opened up, an extremely important and healthy phenomenon. No Islamist party can now claim any serious *religious* authority, even if they wield political, financial, or guerrilla power. Radical and intolerant movements cannot claim monopoly on religious truth and the public has opportunity to hear debate over religion as it affects politics. Already there has been a very significant public break between the major forces of Wahhabism (*Tawhidis* or *Salafis*) in Saudi Arabia and the Muslim Brotherhood over the narrowness and intolerance of the Wahhabis, from whose ranks Al Qaeda emerged.

Divisions, debate, and rivalry among Islamist parties now occur not only between countries, but within a single country as in Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Sudan, and Yemen. Interestingly, in Egypt a more modernist offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood has emerged in the form of the Center Party (*Hizb al-Wasat*), which calls for far greater women’s representation within the party and for the extension of membership to the Coptic Christian minority—using

the values, not the theology, of the Islam as a common denominator. The old-line Brotherhood has opportunistically cooperated with the regime in preventing the Center Party from gaining legal status within the country. Nonetheless, further debate among all these parties is welcome and important. Islamist ideology must be exposed to full public debate if it is to evolve, mature, and deal with the real world responsibly, constructively, and pragmatically.

PLAYING POLITICS

Another development that augurs well for the future is that as Islamist parties legally enter the political order, they start playing politics. They have proven adept at forming coalitions with other parties, regardless of ideology, to achieve common short-term goals, usually conservative ones. In Kuwait, the Muslim Brotherhood and the fundamentalists (*Salafis*) are rivals, but they often agree on conservative approaches to social issues such as separate male-female education and issues of public morality. In Jordan, because of the preponderance of Palestinians in the country, the Brotherhood has played heavily to the agenda of struggle for Palestinian rights in Israel. Although the Brotherhood as an organization does not engage in political violence, it draws a clear distinction, as does most of the Arab world, between the apocalyptic terrorism of the Al Qaeda type, which it condemns, and the armed struggle for Palestinian national liberation, which it condones. The Brotherhood in Jordan seeks to push the regime into greater confrontation with Israel, partly as a tactic to embarrass the regime. Within Palestine itself, the Brotherhood has sponsored the guerrilla-terrorist movement Hamas, to engage in the armed struggle along with secular Palestinian guerrilla organizations.

Islamists also play politics through exploiting Islam in the debate of religious issues that do not lead in the direction of liberalization at all. In Egypt and Kuwait, for example, Islamists have often demanded the government ban specific books or arrest certain leading liberal thinkers for blasphemy. This role is hardly constructive and indeed has the undesirable effect of inhibiting the very debate that would lead to greater evolution and interpretation of Islam in a modern context. In most cases, the Islamists, like other politicians, are strictly playing politics—seeking to embarrass and weaken the state by charging it with insufficient zeal in protecting Islam. Sometimes Islamists will call for the state to adopt far more conservative positions in conformity with ostensible “Islamic law” as a way of pressuring the state. These tactics are familiar in all democracies as some political leaders adopt extreme agendas designed to tactically embarrass the incumbent government and appease key segments of the public even when such agendas are unrealistic.

At the same time, however, politics also forced some degree of liberalization on Islamists. Women’s roles within Islamist parties have grown in all Muslim countries as soon as elections are held because female votes are as valuable as male votes in winning elections. Women’s wings of Islamist parties, and even women on the central committees of these parties, are now commonplace.

In my view, therefore, we can see within Islamist politics some key developments that evoke cautious optimism about its future evolution in the Arab world:

- Broad understanding of the importance of democratization and the benefits that accrue for Islamist parties themselves in calling for more participatory government.

- Willingness of many parties to work pragmatically with other parties with differing ideologies toward common goals without becoming rigidly committed to a narrow vision.
- Exposure of Islamist parties to the political and social realities of the contemporary Arab world in which mere slogans about “Islam is the answer” simply will not suffice; their growing awareness that they need to find concrete answers to concrete problems if they are to succeed in the political arena.
- Broadening of the ideological debate among Islamists themselves, thus opening space for greater intellectual and theoretical development and evolution.
- Signs of growing pragmatism and realism based on experience.
- The nonviolent nature of the vast majority of such parties.
- The likelihood that most of the grand debates of Arab politics in the next decade will be *within* the framework of Islamist politics more broadly. In other words, Islamist debate is just beginning. Political debate must encompass Islam if the debate is to be meaningful. Exclusion of the Islamic factor in Arab politics will simply be one-sided and unrealistic in its exclusion of the single greatest force within politics.

THE INTERNATIONAL FACTOR IN ISLAMIST POLITICS

If the Arab world were operating in isolation, the factors discussed above might be the dominant ones in forging the politics of a new Middle East. A review of these trends would provide ample grounds for optimism about the successful integration of a great segment of the powerful forces of Islamist politics into a democratization process across the Arab world. But the Arab world is not operating in isolation. Indeed, it is now operating within an intensely negative international environment with tensions perhaps unprecedented in the modern history of the Middle East.

The Al Qaeda attacks of 9/11 transformed U.S. policy under the Bush administration, placing the war on terrorism at the centerpiece of U.S. foreign policy. This goal of eliminating terrorism worldwide has focused almost exclusively on the Muslim world where the majority of radical terrorist movements now exist. The war against the Taliban, the invasion of Iraq, the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, the U.S. occupation of Iraq, the spread of U.S. military presence across the Muslim world, the new embrace of authoritarian Muslim regimes as allies in the war on terrorism, the ongoing deterioration of the situation in Palestine, and America’s close identification with the Likud Party’s hard-line policy toward the occupied territories—all have led to a massive growth of anti-American feeling in the Arab world at nearly all levels of society. This sentiment is reflected and deepened by independent satellite television channels and is now beginning to affect the views of an entire generation of young Arabs.

At the same time, Arab regimes are under greater pressure—from the United States on the one hand and their own people on the other—more than ever before, at a time when the gap between the rulers and ruled has never been so wide. Nearly all regimes are viewed with contempt by publics that see them as led by supine dictators, who depend on harsh security services to stay in power, who are powerless to change realities in the Arab world, who cling to tight relations with Washington

at any cost to preserve their power and thus are even more subservient to U.S. interests than more democratic allies of the United States such as Turkey or various Western European countries. There is almost no regime in the region whose fall would not elicit widespread public enthusiasm—with possible exceptions in the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and maybe Morocco. This places Islamists at the forefront of the opposition and in command of much popular support. The public may also show some cynicism on occasion about the opportunism of Islamists as well, but Islamists are the current masters of anti-imperial and anti-regime rhetoric.

Muslims, furthermore, feel uniquely under siege from the West—read the United States—at this stage in their history and react strictly defensively. They are in a hunker-down mode, feeling their culture and religion under attack and under legal discrimination even in the West. Any culture feeling itself under siege turns to basics. As a result, Muslims are embracing Islamic practice more deeply, an essential element of their identity. When their religion is vilified or portrayed in the West as part of the problem, Muslims not surprisingly react by intensifying their identification with Islam as a source of strength, solace, and solidarity. Islamic emotions are stronger than ever. Those Arabs who identify with other ideological trends—Arab nationalism, or the smaller leftist/socialist/Marxist elite, or the quite small liberal Westernizing elite—all find it difficult to avoid being drawn into a broader wave of Islamist–nationalist rhetoric and action dedicated to repelling the foreign invader, militarily, politically, and culturally. The line between nationalism and the Islamic identity is now nearly obliterated: Even *non-Muslim* Arabs generally identify with the broader Islamist–nationalist trend.

PROGNOSIS

In the face of these immense international pressures and “civilizational” confrontations, conditions for continuing moderate evolution of Islamist movements are at their worst. Anti-imperial, as well as anti-regime, instincts now motivate the public at large and generate more radicalized attitudes. A process of polarization is under way in which anti-Western and anti-American violence is now perceived, if not as acceptable, at least as “understandable” in defense of the Islamic homeland and its culture. Radicalism on both the secular and religious levels is merging. Regrettably, it is unrealistic to think that at this juncture in Arab history we will find greater tolerance and openness toward the West or greater interest in Western political institutions or moderation. In the struggle against local regimes, radical ideologies are likely to shout down more moderate and liberal interpretations of Islam and Islamic politics in particular.

The prognosis for political Islam under these conditions—indeed for almost any form of moderate politics—is not good. Moderate voices, Islamist or non-Islamist, dare not speak up in the mood of rising radicalism. Indeed, we might speculate that at least two things must occur before we can hope to see any longer-term trend of moderation within Arab Islamist politics. Only after existing regimes fall, or throw open the political process, will there be a chance for genuinely open and democratic orders to emerge. But this in itself is not enough, for the mood of the new, more populist regimes will initially be anti-American. The external sources of radicalization must also be curtailed. This means an end to the radical right-wing policies of the Likud in Israel and a just settlement of the Palestinian problem, a departure of American troops from the region, and an end

to the more intimidating and broad-brush anti-Muslim discrimination that has unfortunately come to mark the new global alert against Muslim terrorism.

Until this happens, the region will remain radicalized and without political outlets, except through Islamist parties and movements. Anti-American and anti-regime terrorism, if not condoned, will be viewed with immense ambiguity or even indulged by publics at large. These conditions are the worst possible for the moderate evolution of the Arab world. But all is not lost. If these conditions that are generating such radicalism today can be addressed or ameliorated, then the longer-term future of the Arab world is likely to be quite different. Islamist parties will simply become a part of a broader political spectrum and less a source of anxiety to all—as has happened in Turkey. Unfortunately, getting there is not likely to be quick or easy.

NOTE

¹ Rashid Ghannushi, "Islamist Movements: Self-Criticism and Reconsideration," *Palestine Times*, no. 94, April 1999.

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