

Radical Islamist Movements in the Middle East

Hamas, Hizbollah and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood - a Study and a Seminar

March –June 2006



Introduction

Islamist movements in the Middle East have long attracted the interest of scholars from various disciplines in Europe, starting more or less with the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt which emerged in the 1930s. Over the decades, different directions and schools of thinking within Islam found their expression in a number of renewal movements, which increasingly came to play a social and quasi-political role in the multi-faceted Middle East region. Groups appeared and evolved in interaction with each other's line of thought and the social and political circumstances of their respective societies and times, all sharing, however, roots in the common religion Islam and the overall geopolitical setting which we call the Middle East.

The Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979 and the aborted victory of Islamist parties in Algeria in the early 1990s brought the issue of the political role of Islamist movements, and how that role affected the Middle East region and the West, to the forefront. Developments after the attacks of September 11, 2001, focused attention on the ideological and organizational links between some of these movements and international terrorism. In parallel with a broad effort to promote democratic change in the Middle East, which had lived for long under authoritarian – foreign or local - rule, the last few years once more saw the ascendance onto the political scene of some groups normally described as 'Islamist' which had a history of armed militancy within their societies and across borders.

Retaining an ideology based on religious thought, these movements increasingly engaged in political and social activities bordering on that of political parties and social organizations. Some movements became represented in Parliament, whether under a party symbol or by independent members, or even joined Government. In early 2006, one Islamist movement, Palestinian Hamas, won democratic elections and came to form the government. The fact remained, however, that these movements had a recent history or still maintained a pattern of violent action including in some cases terrorist acts. They also embraced some ideas unreconcilable with universally accepted values and had political goals, some of which were unacceptable to large parts of the international community.

These developments brought a host of practical, political issues for European governments to resolve against the backdrop of the broad policy principles long agreed. There was the issue of how best to promote human rights and encourage democracy in a changing setting, which touched on the fundamental question of how far to respect the political will of a people expressed in free elections. There was the question of maintaining working relations with authoritarian governments while desiring to open channels to a much wider political landscape of new-born relevance, which consisted not only of liberal groups with values close to the ones Europeans embrace but also of movements with very different political ideas. On the local scene in the region, there was the issue of how to pursue European-sponsored development projects in a partly new political setting. European governments also had to grapple with such issues as the system of listing organizations as 'terrorist', and what political implications that should entail apart from the prescribed legal effects. All this interacted with the big political issues of the day in a conflict-ridden region.

Against this background, it was decided to launch a project jointly by the Middle East and North Africa Department (UD-MENA) and the Policy Analysis Office (UD-ANA) of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs with a view to improving the understanding of radical Islamist

movements in the Middle East and creating a better basis for policy decisions. It was felt that the wealth of reports on the history and ideology of such movements and recent studies with a focus on terrorism needed to be supplemented by a broader analysis of them as social and political actors. Therefore, a study of trends and prospects in the internal developments in such movements could be useful. Of particular interest would be their relations with existing political systems and attitudes to social reform and democratization, including their susceptibility to adapt and be integrated into long-term political processes. The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Hamas in the Palestinian territories and Hizbollah in Lebanon, which have become associated with practical policy issues and attracted a lot of attention, were chosen as the primary study objects in order to limit the scope of the project in a reasonable way. The project was intended to be policy relevant but not to lead up to any policy recommendations.

To this end, the Ministry in late February 2006 commissioned a report on these three movements by Mr Magnus Norell, Ph D, of the Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI). The perspective of the report, which had a limited scope and should be ready by June, was to be contemporary and forward-looking rather than historical and the focus to be domestic, social and political rather than ideological or theological.. The study should then be presented and discussed at a seminar in June, the deliberations of which would be recorded in summary. Ambassador Cecilia Ruthström-Ruin of the MFAs Global Security Department and Director Jan Henningsson of the Swedish Institute in Alexandria were selected to act as reference persons for the project. To help secure quality, the Middle East correspondent of The Economist, Mr Max Rodenbeck was invited to perform an external review and provide comments at the seminar in the capacity of discussant. Ambassador Per Saland of MENA acted as project manager.

It is our pleasure to publicize in this way the materials of this joint MENA-ANA project which consist of the study by Dr Norell as delivered in late May and an analytical summary of the seminar on 15 June 2006 at which it was discussed. The seminar took place in Stockholm and gathered some 40 invited participants from the Government Offices, various official authorities and institutions as well as academia in Sweden. The comments made by Mr Rodenbeck are reproduced in the seminar summary.

When reading these materials one should remember the time factor. The study could only reflect developments up to mid-May. The seminar was then held before last summer's abduction of Israeli soldiers and Israel's offensive in Gaza and war against Hizbollah in Lebanon. Furthermore, it should be underlined that the views in the report are Dr Norell's own and should not be read as representative of the Swedish Government. Nor of course are all of the various, often contradictory observations made during the seminar.

The wide range of views expressed in the course of this project testifies to the fact that the issues involved are difficult and merit further discussion. Although this particular project hereby comes to a close, it is our hope that these papers will stimulate such a discussion.

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Islamist Movements in the Middle East:
Hamas, Hizb'allah and the Egyptian
Moslem Brotherhood.

Study by Mr Magnus Norell, Ph.D., of the Swedish Defence Research Agency commissioned jointly by the Middle East and North Africa Department and the Policy Analysis Office of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Sweden in view of a seminar to be held on 15 June, 2006

Stockholm, May 2006

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Executive Summary

The election victory of Hamas in January 2006 was the latest in a series of political successes for Islamist movements¹ throughout the Middle East. With Hamas victory, the issue of how to deal with political Islam, as it is being utilised by Islamist Movements, came to the fore yet again.

In the case of Hamas and the Palestinian scene, the election victory meant that an organisation defined as a terrorist organisation by some in the international community (including some in the so called ‘Quartet’²), has now taken over the governance of the Palestinian Authority (PA), forcing the international community into a new situation. Moreover, the election victory was eased by Hamas’ successes in the local elections in late 2005, which gave the movement (who took part in the elections under the name; ‘reform and change’) time to consolidate and prepare for the national elections in January 2006.

Hamas is a self-professed part of the Moslem Brotherhood³ and so is part of a network of Islamist movements and parties throughout the Middle East. The Egyptian Brotherhood, although banned in Egypt since 1954, is nevertheless taking an active part in Egyptian politics. In the most recent elections for the People’s Assembly in Egypt – held in three stages between November 9 and December 9, 2005 – the Brotherhood (taking part as ‘independents’ since parties based on religious platforms are forbidden in Egypt) increased its representation to become the largest opposition block, increasing the representation five-fold compared to the outgoing assembly. The

¹ For the purposes of this paper, ‘Islamist’ is here defined as an organisation or movement that uses both politics and armed struggle (including terrorism but not within their own constituencies) to further their goals, motivating themselves religiously by interpretations from the Koran including the ‘sanctification’ of ‘resistance’ (military, legal or cultural) to the non-moslem world. Another common trait is the non-separation of religion from state.

² The EU, US, UN and Russia.

³ Established in Egypt in 1928 by Hassan al-Banna.

ruling National Party won of course, but the elections forced the regime to use every trick in the book to put obstacles in the way of the Brotherhood¹. In the end, however, there was no denying that without the government's well-trying methods (mass arrests of Brotherhood activists, restricted access to voting booths, harassment and a campaign of slander and intimidation in the state-controlled media towards Brotherhood candidates), the success of the Brotherhood, and its role as the only viable organized opposition to the government, would have been even greater.

The successes of these two Sunni-Moslem parties/movements in the political processes in their respective country should come as no surprise. The pragmatism shown by Hamas and the Brotherhood has been part and parcel of the set-up since the origin of the movements. Alternating between the bullet and the ballot (where that has been possible) has been one of the hallmarks of how the Moslem Brotherhood has been working. In the Egyptian case, the Brotherhood gave up the armed struggle some three decades ago (leading to a split whereby the militants morphed into terrorist organisations such as the Egyptian Islamic Jihad and some other smaller groups), in essence choosing Da'awa (preaching and peaceful converting by example) instead of Jihad. In both the Palestinian and the Egyptian case, the lack of any viable secular opposition to the corrupt and entrenched regimes 'in situ' helped their case; toning down some of the more shrill and radical rhetoric and emphasising social issues instead as well as putting pride in indigenous concepts of Islam and its teachings of justice and fairness to all. However, there has been no change, neither rhetorically nor otherwise, in what the long-term goals are. Both groups still strive for the establishment of religious states based on the Sharia and preclude the influence of any other religious tenets in matters of state. They do of course tolerate the existence of other faiths. It is important to keep this in mind since in the West, the issue is often presented as one of choosing either to bring the Islamists into the political processes (and merely by doing that, bringing about a change whereby long-held beliefs will be cast off in favour of more democratic beliefs compatible with Western democracies), or keeping them out and thereby 'forcing' them to retain or choose militancy and/or terrorism. Evidence, however, points to the fact that political participation in itself does not necessarily change the long-term

¹ For a comprehensive analysis of the elections see: JCSS Strategic Assessment, Vol. 8, No. 4, February 2006.

strategy. It is viewed more as a tactical tool to be used when the opportunity is given and does not in itself bring about any 'change of heart'. Various factors, such as pressure from the regimes, external circumstances and political change in general, all play a role in these decisions to go political or not on part of the Islamists. For the foreseeable future, there are no indications that this pragmatic outlook will change.

These factors are underlined by the way in which the Shi'a Moslem counterpart to Hamas and the Brotherhood, the Lebanese Hizb'allah, has acted within the context of Lebanese and Syrian political constraints. Sharing many of the end-goals such as a religious state based on the Sharia and a 'non-acceptance' of Israel, Hizb'allah has used its role as a militant organisation fighting for Lebanese independence in the face of Israeli occupation to build themselves a position as one of the strongest players in the Lebanese parliament. Like Hamas, Hizb'allah is defined as a terrorist organization by some international players and, again like Hamas, has kept political, social and militant parts of their organization tightly connected, whereby the political leadership is the final decision-maker. Despite the Israeli withdrawal, underwritten by the UN, from Lebanon, Hizba'llah has kept all its arms (using the quiet since the Israeli withdrawal to replenish both arms and munition) and refused to disarm. After the Syrian withdrawal of its armed forces from Lebanon in the wake of the murder of former Lebanese premier Rafik Hariri, Hizb'allah came under new pressure to disarm. But Hizb'allah was also included in the new Lebanese 'national unity government' and has, so far, been able to resist disarming. Without heavy outside pressure it is difficult to see any chance that this will change, thus keeping tension along the border with Israel high and rendering it impossible for the Lebanese government to extend its sovereignty to the whole country.

For the international community, the issue is how to deal with the consequences of having militant organisations (sometimes defined as terrorist) inside the political structures of countries (or, as in the Palestinian case, a national entity on the road to become a country), organisations which are reluctant to change long-term strategic goals that are directly detrimental to the democratic developments being pursued by those same international actors. Taking stock at the time of writing (May 2006) it seems clear that the pragmatism that helped the movements, dealt with here, to be such influential players in their respective political setting, will keep being part of their

political set-up. The fact that these successes on the political playing field have come about without the organisations having made any concessions in terms of casting off their militancy, disarming or choosing or promising to solely use political means henceforth, means that there are no real incentives to such change either¹. Key western players, the EU in particular, have refrained from all-out pressure against either the movements, or indirectly through the regimes (such as the Egyptian or Lebanese), to make the choice of either opting for peaceful means and recognising their adversary Israel, or facing severe economic and political boycotts and/or other consequences. Some economic sanctions have been applied, but they have been cautious and modelled so as not to create any humanitarian crisis². Instead, a policy that can perhaps be described as ‘muddling through’ has been applied, underlying the difficulties with handling the new political realities ‘on the ground’. The basis for that seems to be a belief that the mere fact of bringing these movements into the political fold will be enough to bring about democratic ‘changes of the heart’ of the sort the West hopes for. However, there are no real signs of such changes in the foreseeable future. It is also clear that in the cases of Hamas and Hizb’allah, the military, or armed, branches are integral parts of the political and structural set-up of the organisations. For these movements, the ‘armed struggle’ has been an important component in the political achievements gained lately, and one conclusion is that without rather heavy pressure from outside (and possibly from the ‘inside’ too), there are no signs that these parts of the movements will be dismantled anytime soon.

¹ As an example see Hamas reaction towards the suicide bombings in Tel Aviv on April 17. The attacks were explicitly condoned by Hamas. *The Economist*, April 22nd-28th 2006, p. 39.

² In addition to keep ‘humanitarian’ aid (through the UN and other NGO’s), the consequences of these sanctions *can* be partly offset by economic support provided by other donors such as Iran and some GCC-countries such as Saudi-Arabia (if that support materialises). A consequence of this is that the ‘stick’ used by for instance the EU – i.e. economic sanctions – is rendered less harmful. This is not to deny that the sanctions do bite; for the Palestinian public, the economic and social situation is quite severe. Sanctions are also partly offset by the fact that individual members of Hamas can still be invited and met in Europe (there is a distinction made between the organisation and its members). For example, in May members of Hamas were invited to Norway and Sweden. In Norway Hamas members met officials of the Norwegian Foreign Ministry, and in Sweden, the invitee – Hamas Minister of refugees , Atef Adwan – took part in a conference and met some NGO’s as well as Swedish MP’s but no government officials. Furthermore, the economic and social effects on the Palestinians that do have come about as a result of the sanctions, have also been used by the new PA government, to rally people in defiance to ‘pressure from the external enemy’ wanting to impose changes on the Palestinians from abroad.

Introduction

'Islam is the solution'

In the study, each movement will be discussed independently beginning with the Egyptian Moslem Brotherhood followed by Hamas and ending with Hizb'allah. The study will begin with an executive summary, followed by an introduction. It will be rounded up with a concluding chapter (conclusions) and a discussion of possible future trends for the movements.

This paper is not a study on the specifics of the movements Hamas, Hizb'allah and the Egyptian Moslem Brotherhood. Instead, the purpose is to discuss these movements in light of the electoral successes they have achieved during the last 18 months. Discussions will centre on how these successes were achieved, how they have played out within the respective electorate, whether there are chances for, or a willingness to reform and democratise and finally, what road these movements might take in the immediate future. Underlying all these questions (that will have to be dealt with rather summarily taking into account the limited scope of the study), is the issue how the international community in general, and Sweden and the EU in particular, can deal with movements defined by some as terrorist which simultaneously are building extensive social structures, with everything from hospitals to 'micro-funding' for new entrepreneurs, and conducting deadly terrorist attacks sometimes specifically aimed at non-combatants.

It is in this regard important to point out that these movements, although sharing some overall ideological and religious goals, are different from one another and do not, even in the case of the Egyptian Moslem Brotherhood and their sister organisation Hamas, choose the same tactics all the time. To sum it up; the end-goal remain the same, but depending on where the movement stand, there are different roads leading to that goal.

At this point it is also paramount to draw attention to the difference between the Egyptian case and the two other cases of Hamas and Hizb'allah. In Egypt, the Moslem Brotherhood decided more than thirty years ago to opt for political change instead of the 'armed struggle' (see more on this below). This has meant that the emphasis in Egypt is on 'reforming by example', putting social issues ahead and showing by example that the Moslem Brotherhood's ideology and work in all areas are supreme to that of the regime itself. We are witnessing a long-term strategy during the course of which the Moslem Brotherhood has built up all its various functions and slowly and quietly where organising society into 'bastions of Islamist examples' has shown how society could and should be run, thus paving the way for the electoral gains made late in 2005.

Hamas and Hizb'allah both started out from very different positions, and much later too¹. As will be shown, there is no real evidence pointing in the direction of either Hamas or Hizb'allah choosing 'the ballot over the bullet'. It is rather a question of how the ballot will change the immediate tactical choices ahead. Here again, the answers are dependent on where the movements stand at this very junction in time. All this of course does not in itself preclude any long-term, strategic changes in the future, but it does suggest that these changes will probably not come about without some heavy pressure from the outside, since all the electoral gains have been achieved without the movements having had to abandon or dissolve the militant parts of their movements. In short, it is the ballot *and* the bullet that is regarded, within the movements, as being the reason for the electoral successes. As a consequence, both movements view their political and armed wings as integral parts of their respective movement and will continue to use both parts in enhancing the positions of the movements within the larger national context of their respective country.

Furthermore, despite the fact that all three movements are parts of pan-Islamism, building on trans-national ideologies that view national Moslem states as anomalies², all movements are also very much integral parts of their

¹ There is of course a history here that should be taken into account. The limited scope of the study does not allow for this to be included however. Suffice it here to say that the long history of pan-Islamist organisations, movements and activism in late nineteenth and early twentieth century is an immediate backdrop to today's Islamist movements.

² A defining feature of the Islamism the movements discussed here base themselves on, is the notion that to reach the perfect state, a Moslem Khalifat ought to be the desired goal. This is by definition trans-national and the 'break-up', into several independent states, of the Moslem world is seen by the Islamists as an important factor in explaining the woes and miseries of the present Moslem world.

respective country. In fact, it can be argued that much of the explanation of the popularity of the movements, even outside the traditional constituencies, can be found in the emphasis of being ‘nationalists’ first and the downplaying of the pan-Islamist ideology underpinning the movements. This is of importance since the political realities ‘on the ground’ could play a role in changing the movements at least tactically. As this author has pointed out in another study¹, one of the present trends in the Middle East is a new emphasis on the nation-state (as opposed to the former, now very much discredited ideas of pan-Islamism and pan-Arabism). Therefore, too much talk of pan-Islamism can easily backfire. At the same time however, it must be pointed out that Islam itself, regardless of ideological leanings, is no stranger to the idea of putting one’s religious ideology before national pride. After all, the Khalifat was not abolished until 1920.

What this leads up to is that there is no inherent contradiction between the basic ideology of the movements and their place in ‘national’ politics, considering the long-term view these movements have of themselves and their roles. This is important, since various tactical concessions are seen as perfectly legitimate. The leaderships in all movements (and of course in other similar Islamist movements) have constantly referred to the fact that the end-goals of the movements are a long way down the road. At the same time, this does not preclude short-term, tactical concessions that, on the face of it, go against these same long-term goals. For the purpose of this study, this is noteworthy, especially in the context of the conflict with Israel, a conflict that all these movements see as one of fundamental importance. For them, that conflict can only be ‘solved’ by removing or destroying Israel altogether. That land is a ‘waqf’, Moslem land once ‘occupied’ that can never be given up. Reaching this goal will of course take some time, and achieving the destruction of Israel can entail reaching short-term ‘hudnas’ or ceasefires, but only as temporary solutions. It can of course be discussed how the term ‘never’ should be understood. It is, however, important to note that for the Islamist movements discussed here, outside observers do well to remember that ‘concessions’ in the form of ceasefires, even if they are for a long time, do not necessarily equal any fundamental changes on part of the movements. Again, this is of course not to say that fundamental changes will *definitely not* occur. But as a basis for

¹ Magnus Norell. ‘Trender i Mellanöstern och arabvärlden’, FOI MEMO 1590, December 2005.

peaceful solutions to conflicts (if by peace is meant more than just the absence of war) it is rather thin.

It is therefore fair to argue that the key question here is not whether to bring the Islamists onto the political playing field or not. That has already happened, as can be seen in all of our three case-studies. The issue is rather how we are to deal with these very pragmatic and politically savvy Islamist movements now that they have already been brought onboard the political steamroller. This is an especially pertinent issue, since some key actors within the international community are defining both Hamas and Hizb'allah as terrorist organisations.

On the face of it there seems to be two main lines of argument concerning this key issue. The first line argues that the inclusion (onto the political competition fields) *itself* will bring about changes and that the fact that the Islamists can, and have reached some of their goals by peaceful means constitutes enough proof of the merits of the ballot as compared to the bullet. Proponents of the second line of argumentation point out that the Islamists are only using the system without any plans to change their long-term goals (that in some cases go against the very tenets of basic democracy) and that without external (and perhaps domestic pressure as well), there are no real incentives to change.

Advocacy of the first, optimistic, scenario can for example be exemplified by reports by the International Crisis Group (ICG)¹. In essence they say that fears of letting organisations like Hamas participate in elections (movements having their own militias, that embrace violence – including terror-attacks – and that are publicly arguing for the destruction of their main adversary) are overblown. Instead, they argue, it is the benefits of a successful participation that will tame Hamas (and other likeminded movements). The constraints and responsibilities of [democratic] politics will force such movements to mellow, both rhetorically and in actual effect. As Marina Ottaway, of the Carnegie Endowment, wrote in the summer of 2005: *There is ample evidence that participation in an electoral process forces any party, regardless of ideology,*

¹ For this study, four ICG reports have been used: Middle East Report No: 21, 26 January 2004, Middle East Report No: 46, 4 October 2005, Middle East Report No: 48, 5 December 2005 and Middle East Report No: 49, 18 January 2006.

to moderate its position if it wants to attract voters in large numbers.'¹. Furthermore, such movements should be welcomed in participatory politics since this in itself will be a key tool to transform them from militant radicals into more mainstream politicians. A key element of this argumentation is that once these movements are inside the political structures, they will have to answer up to a lot more people than their original constituencies (especially if they win), and this can only be achieved by holstering the gun and starting to deliver. If they don't, they will run the risk of being marginalised. In short; behave or bust. Also, these optimists point to the fact the mere willingness to participate in politics at all is a sign of moderation.

The logic behind this reasoning seems solid enough. There are several examples of non-democratic radical movements taking the leap over the abyss to become respected political players. Examples of this benign evolution of illiberal and often violent movements and organisations run the gamut from European socialist parties after WWI to more recent examples of former communist parties in Eastern Europe after the end of the Cold War. In the discussion concerning the Middle East, parallels have been drawn to Ireland and Angola, and in the Middle East itself, a case like Turkey is often mentioned. For the purpose of this study, countries like Jordan, Egypt and Lebanon are all mentioned as cases where Islamists have (for various lengths of time) participated successfully in elections and politics while at the same time having renounced violence².

Advocates of the second school, the realists, however point to some interesting lessons to be drawn from the historic examples at hand. Very often those are the same cases argued by the optimists, but looked on from other angles. The first lesson to be drawn is that political participation in itself does not automatically lead to an embrace of democratic means. It rather seems to be dependent on certain conditions being present in the respective political context. They point out that no Islamist movement has, as far as can be assessed, moderated its ideology (by for example renouncing violence) of its own volition. This has only come about as a result of lack of alternatives, or as a result of external and domestic pressure.

¹ 'Can Hamas be Tamed', Herzog Michael, *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2006.

² It should be pointed out here that in 'renouncing violence' in the case of Islamists in Egypt and Jordan (and elsewhere in the Middle East), there is a distinction made between violence at home and abroad. While renouncing violence in the home country, Islamists argue that it is perfectly legitimate to use it against Israel and that includes terror-attacks that are seen as part of the Palestinian liberation struggle.

If and when co-optation occurs, it seems that at least three common factors have to be present:

1) Existence of a [relatively] free political system, with a rather healthy and solid structure into which these Islamists can be brought.

2) A situation where there are other actors, creating a balance of power that, to an extent, forces the Islamists to ‘play by the rules’.

3) Enough time to make this co-optation have an impact on the Islamists.

1) In an article in the *International Herald Tribune* (IHT) in October 2005¹, empirical examples are given to show that when ‘new-born democracies’ lack basic conditions of stability – such as an independent judiciary, a good standard of educational institutions and a fair and free press – the end-result is often times an aggressive (both domestically and externally) regime. Elections, even if they are free and fair, are not enough to create such a structure. Without such functioning institutions it will be ‘all sails and no rudder’, sending the political system into whatever direction the wind is blowing. Thus, if the political order is anything but stable and if the state cannot or does not enforce a monopoly on authority and violence, there is little reason for a party to disarm for example (and many reasons for it not to). The cases of the Palestinian Hamas and the Lebanese Hizb’allah are good illustrations of this.

2) In the wake of WWII, many European countries barred outright certain political parties to prevent a resurgence of Fascism or Nazism. They also set up a number of legislative obstacles to help contain and prevent the havoc that radical parties with their own militias can wreak. In 1948, the first Israeli independent government (under Premier Ben-Gurion) forcibly crushed armed partisan groups to stop them from wielding any influence in the democracy. And in the 1980’s – in the wake of the racist Kach party getting into the Israeli parliament – the legislature excluded outright extremist, violence-prone parties. Finally, in Turkey and in Jordan, the army and the monarchy respectively, have set clear limits to the kind of behaviour permitted. All these examples serve to illustrate the importance, even necessity, of checks and balances. Because

¹ ‘When ballots bring on bullets’, Edward D Mansfield & Jack Snyder, *IHT* October 29-30, 2005.

without them, a radical party, with a militia of its own, will be able to capture the state apparatus and bend it the way it wants.

3) Time, finally, is a critical component. The reason is that political moderation – and trust in political structures without depending on your own private army for protection – is not learned in a day. Such developments take generations. Examples abound: It took decades for the Moslem Brotherhood in Egypt to renounce violence for instance. And even in Ireland, with its history of political participation, it took seven years after the Good Friday agreement before the IRA finally decommissioned its arms. If democratisation is imposed or rushed in too early (before the proper structures are there) the situation might actually get worse. At the very least, one should not be surprised of backlashes and the resurgence of corruption and domestic violence¹.

Applying these two lines of argumentation to the three cases discussed here, it is clear that both the ‘optimist’ and the ‘realist’ school have merits.

The optimists can correctly state that once you decide to get involved politically, there is a certain amount of ‘corruption’ that forces you to adapt, at least to some extent. This is true for all cases studied here.

For the Brotherhood in Egypt, playing by the rules set down by the government – as well as facing up to the harsh pressure exerted by earlier Egyptian regimes – meant an adaptation and a realisation that violence would not get them very far. Instead the movement survived, trying to reach more and more people by concentrating on social ills in society, ills that the governments of Egypt have been very inept at solving.

For Hamas and the Palestinians, taking part in the elections meant striking a deal with the PA and their opponents, moderating, at least publicly, the rhetoric and assuring everyone that change would be brought about only by setting examples. Participation also meant, tactically at least, dealing with the Israelis. Optimists also point to statements from the new Premier Ismail Haniyeh to the effect that a two-state solution could be contemplated².

Lastly, Hizb’allah in Lebanon has shown that it is indeed possible to transform parts of your platform to an electoral and political party-based launch-pad for changes in society at large. Taking part in Lebanese party

¹ For an eloquent and interesting discussion of this phenomenon see: ‘Where have all the revolutions gone?’, Anthony Lieven, *IHT*, October 29-30, 2005.

² *Haaretz*, April 7, 2006 (web edition).

politics, with all that this entails, has forced Hizb'allah to adapt as well and to reach out to constituencies other than its core groups within the Shi'a community.

It is thus clear that participating politically has meant adaptation and moderation. The beauty of the optimist argument is of course that it is open-ended; we do not know exactly when these adaptations and changes will make it down to the more fundamental ideological tenets, if at all. But there always seems to be a question of not applying pressure from the outside and to wait just a little while longer before these changes are to take place¹.

However, the 'realists' also appear to have a point.

For the Egyptian Moslem Brotherhood, it is exactly the pressure extended (from the government and from the Brotherhood's domestic critics) that has forced changes, they are not any voluntarily chosen new path. The realists point out that without that pressure, and set rules, it is highly unlikely that any moderation would have taken place at all.

As for Hamas, the realists point out that nothing done or said by anyone in the movement, so far at least, shows any sign of fundamental ideological moderation or change, despite the fact that it has taken part in elections and are very much inside the political structures. Neither has it disarmed, despite demands from external actors with an interest in peacemaking in the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. Realists also point out that (a readiness to be) 'talking to the enemy' (i.e. the Israelis) in no way would be proof of any changes towards moderation. In fact, Hamas has always professed a large amount of pragmatism.

In Lebanon, the realists point out, the evolution of Hizb'allah has given the organisation an excellent platform from which to struggle for its long-term goals without having to worry too much over any domestic pressure. As for the external pressure, the international community is too divided to be able to mount any serious obstacle to the movement's long-term goals. For both

¹ An illustration to this line of reasoning can be found in looking at the two ICG reports dealing with Hamas, used for this study (ICG reports No: 21, 26 January 2004 and Middle East Report No: 49, 18 January 2006). Comparing these two, at the time of the second report – on the eve of the Palestinian election – when it was clear that Hamas would do well at the polls, recommendations from the first report (two years earlier), had been toned down considerably, despite the fact that in the mean-time, EU had labelled the whole of Hamas a terrorist organisation and demands for change had been consistent from Brussels, and no effect could be seen on part of Hamas. In all fairness, this can of course be attributed to a 'realist' acceptance of realities on the ground. At the same time it is easy enough to see that the recommendations mirror a *reactive* approach, more than a *proactive* one.

Hamas and Hizb'allah, the only times when the movements have had to back down are when outside pressure has forced them too. Finally, say the realists, no fundamental change in these movements' founding ideology has occurred, making peaceful conflict resolution with Israel – as well as with other external and domestic opponents – highly unlikely.

To sum up; While the optimists are banking on the inherent 'good' that comes out of merely taking part in participatory politics, although the evolution will, and must be allowed to, take time, the realists criticise this approach as too lenient and point to the fact that peace (in the respective societies and with the outside world) does not come by itself as a result of evolution, but has to be 'helped along'. The issue therefore, seems to be one of either choosing to wait and hope that the optimists are right in their assessment, or to apply some real pressure (by withholding recognition and aid, continuing to treat Hamas and Hizb'allah as terrorist organisations with everything that this entails, and explicitly demanding that the movements change fundamentally before these pressures will be eased) and hope that the realists are right in their assessment and that such a policy does not seriously deepen the strife it is meant to prevent.

The first line would give time for things to change inside the political structures in case, but would also run the risk of merely helping the Islamists to get even more settled, giving them time to keep pursuing their long-term, inherently un-democratic and sometimes violent goals. This line seems, so far at least, to have made no headway in changing any fundamental tenets of the Islamist movements.

The second line could bring about more sudden changes, but could also alienate more people by exposing them more to Islamist propaganda that 'the West' is really out to force them to change. It is a policy that would run the risk of backfire, giving the West even less leeway. The big advantage with this line of policy seems to be that the international community would actually stick to its stated principles of democracy and peaceful coexistence as the preferred long-term and over-riding goal, and show some preparedness to back up this policy with deeds as well.

The Egyptian Moslem Brotherhood

*'Even if the bullet misses the target, the
gun still makes a noise'.*

(Arab proverb)

In December 2005, by the time the Egyptian parliamentary elections were over, the Moslem Brotherhood (MB) had received some 20% of the votes, firmly establishing themselves as the only real and viable opposition party to president Mubarak's 25-year old regime. Those elections came on the heels of the first Egyptian presidential election contested by more than one candidate. An important reason for this 'liberalisation' move on the part of the Mubarak regime, was the pressure directed against his government from the US. But the way in which Mubarak handled first the presidential election, and then the parliamentary one, points to some important features of how regimes in the Arab world effectively fight off pressure from abroad. By allowing elections that were indeed comparatively free and fair, Mubarak's regime could score 'democratic points' in Washington and Brussels. At the same time, the restrictions surrounding the elections made it a foregone conclusion that he would win anyway.

This is important since Egypt has a key position in the Arab Moslem world as a whole. Other Moslem nations might surpass Egypt concerning economical strength and strategic position but when it comes to political and religious debate and change Egypt has often taken a leading role in the Moslem community. The country also has a long history of liberalism and although the Egyptian constitution states that Egypt is a Moslem country, and that the Sharia is the primary source for legislation, there is a sizeable Christian minority and other sources of law, such as 'Code Napoleon', also constitute important bases for legislation and governing relations between different religious groups in the country.

It is in this setting that the Moslem Brotherhood has established itself as the only real opposition group to the regime. It draws its broad support from the poorer layers of the population but important support also comes from other groups such as doctors, lawyers and teachers. This Islamist movement has challenged the Egyptian establishment since its birth in 1928. Traditionally the Moslem Brotherhood is a nationalistic movement that combines Sufism – an interpretation which emphasizes certain mystical aspects of Islam – with a generally conservative understanding of the Koran and promotes Sharia law (incidentally, this coincides with what is known of other, more radical Islamist movements – such as al-Qaeda – and their ideology), and one of the goals of which is to rid the state from western influence. The Brotherhood's attitude towards violence has fluctuated over the years and would now at best be described as ambiguous. In 1971 the movement renounced violence (at least at home), a decision that led to the more radical parts of the movement evolving into full-fledged terrorist organisations such as the Islamic Jihad. Since then, the emphasis has been on political and social work to promote the movement's goal of establishing a religiously based state in Egypt. The ups and downs of the movement have had a lot to do with the way various regimes have come to view it. While Nasser with his very Arab-nationalist ideology vigorously fought the movement (among other things Nasser had one of the most influential and important ideologues of Islamism hanged, Sayid Qutb), his successor, Anwar Sadat, saw the movement as an important ally that he thought he could use to draw away support from other, for the regime more dangerous, opposition groups. The present President, Mubarak, has viewed the movement more or less in the same vein.

This was clearly seen in the run-up to both the presidential and the parliamentary elections. While the government saw the protest movement Kifaya as a force that had to be cut down to size (after initially having allowed it to protest rather freely against Israeli and US policies), the Brotherhood was at the beginning left alone. It was not until after it became clear that the Brotherhood was poised to gain heavily in the Parliamentary elections that the regime tried to stymie the work of the movement and put up obstacle in the way the Brotherhood could work politically. Despite the harsh treatment of the Brotherhood, candidates tied to the movement did well and increased their representation five-fold compared to the outgoing assembly. All this has created a situation whereby the Brotherhood has strengthened its position in relation to the government and, at the same time, been able to take advantage

of the fact that other oppositional movements have been the target of much of the government's attempts to crush serious opposition to the regime.

The ensuing reality was thus created by several factors that the Brotherhood has gained from. First is the weakness of party politics in Egypt. The traditional political opposition parties have failed to seriously challenge the authoritarian regime. This is in large part due to the regime's tendency to prevent new political forces from inserting into the state more civilian characters. The treatment of important oppositional figures such as Dr. Saad Eddin Ibrahim (head of the Ibn Khaldoun Centre) and Ayman Nour (founder of the al-Ghad party) are cases in point. There are also extensive obstacles to the formation of secular liberal parties¹. Legally recognized opposition parties received only nine seats in the new assembly and many additional parties did not receive any mandates at all. In addition, the failure of the Kifaya movement to unite in the face of government repression meant that a kind of stalemate between the secular parties was created, leaving the Brotherhood, although illegal, as the only serious contender to offer any vital opposition to Mubarak's regime.² In essence, therefore, the elections of 2005 really meant the end (for now at least) of secular (as it were) parliamentary opposition. The elections exposed all the inherent weaknesses of Egyptian opposition; fragile organizational party structures, absence of a strong party leadership and lack of any new ideas on how to challenge the regime.

In contrast, the Brotherhood showed prowess in all these areas and could thus mount a much more concerted and effective challenge, despite being harassed by the regime all through the election period. It had thousands of volunteers recruiting voters by using extensive computerised databases and public opinion polls. It had large financial resources, gained from contributions in the form of zakat payments in the movement's mosques and, quite possibly, external sources too. Careful preparation were made, taking advantage of rightly perceived public disgust with the regime and the pressure to democratise applied on Mubarak from the US and EU as well. This meant also that a number of voters probably voted not so much *for* a religious state as *against* the present regime. The current successes proved beyond doubt that the strategic choice made in 1971 to promote Da'wa (preaching and emotionally

¹ It should be pointed out that Egypt really has no 'secular' political group in the Western meaning of the term)

² ICG Middle East/North Africa Report N 46 (4 October 2005) 'Reforming Egypt: In Search for a Strategy',

converting) instead of violent Jihad, had been the right move. And this the Brotherhood could achieve without ever abandoning the slogan 'Islam is the solution', or changing any fundamental tenets of their ideology¹. Combined pressure for democratisation from abroad as well as from domestic groups (such as the Kifaya movement²) on the Mubarak regime, meant that the Brotherhood could exploit the weakening grip of the regime because, at least in the beginning of the election process, the government spent more resources on resisting the challenge from the legalised parliamentary opposition (and their non-parliamentary supporters) than on the peaceful Brotherhood and their quiet social activity. Through this tactic, the Brotherhood achieved both public legitimacy and inclusion in the political arena. Since the Brotherhood is not a true political party this in turn meant that integration into established institutions, was gained without it being shackled by either the parties law or the non-governmental organizations law.

On a more general level, and viewed against the sometimes repressive methods of the Egyptian government and the public's scepticism to western, and particularly US policy, it is of course important that serious attempts are made to create political pluralism in Egypt. If the status quo is maintained the Egyptian public may grow weary of the perceived hypocrisy from the legal opposition and resort to more radical alternatives. Whether the Brotherhood can be a channel for such change, or an obstacle to it, remains to be seen. How the strengthening of the Brotherhood in the People's Assembly will play out is dependent on many factors. Opinions diverge. One common view is that the inclusion onto the parliamentary scene, on a scale not seen before, means that the movement's self-image will change from a besieged and threatened pressure-group, to a movement with a mandate to change and present practical alternatives to everyday problems. It will be impossible to hide behind the slogan: 'Islam is the solution' for very long.

On the other hand, the polarity created on the Egyptian parliamentary scene, may also confirm to the regime that it choose a correct path in allowing a *limited* presence of the Moslem Brotherhood and cracking down on the

¹ When, back in 1939, the Brotherhood created a political party (outlawed since 1954), there were three basic founding principles; That Islam embraces everything in life, that Islam rests on the Koran and the Sunna and that the principles developed from these sources are valid everywhere in society. For a discussion of these principles, see for example, Christer Hedin, 'Islam i samhället', Stockholm 2005.

² The Kifaya (enough) movement is an amalgamation of several groups that grew out of the spontaneous protests against Israel and the US during the times of the Al-aqsa Intifada and the Iraqi war respectively.

‘secular’ opposition.. The achievements of the Brotherhood will possibly be used by the government as proof of what happens to the democracy project when you let Islamists onto the political playing field. It will be used as an argument to resist western pressure to democratise too much.

It is clear that the Brotherhood saw an opportunity to gain some political ground in the present situation and that they felt that the gains predicted could be utilised to the hilt. Therefore it is probable that the movement will aim for a role in the process of reforming Egypt’s internal life. Regardless of what road the government will choose in dealing with the Brotherhood in the parliament, it is going to have to pay more attention to internal matters and ills in society, such as the social service infrastructure, corruption, civil rights and insufficient welfare systems. All these are areas where the Brotherhood has had much grassroot experience. Thus, it is a fair assessment that the government will let the movement be put to the test through its political action in parliament. Every step and vote taken will be scrutinised and of course the regime can still maintain the rules outside parliament to impose restrictions on the movement through the emergency law, prohibition of activities and arrests. There seems to be little risk for the regime at present to follow this road, as was indicated by President Mubarak at the opening session of the Assembly.

In the Middle East there are several ‘models’ of how to deal with Islamist movements entering, or trying to enter, the state political system. There is the Iranian or Sudanese model whereby Islamism more or less took over the state, the Algerian model, where the regime went in and crushed the Islamist threat (and in the process triggered a civil war) and the Turkish and Moroccan model where inclusion under specific and clear parameters ‘guided’ the Islamists, making them partners but in the process forcing them to scrap and/or change some fundamental tenets of their ideology. In Egypt, looking at the history of relations between the State and Islam, it is most likely that the regime will continue to tolerate the Brotherhood ‘independents’ as a parliamentary opposition bloc, but that the actual Moslem Brotherhood movement will still be outlawed. This model can be expected to be followed for as long as the existing political and social order is not threatened.

The movement is certainly aware of all this and it is probable that this will guide it in its daily dealings in the parliament. At this juncture it is very likely that the fact that the regime has to move on the domestic issues, important to the movement, will mean that the Brotherhood will keep this two-pronged strategy of working carefully both within and outside of the political field. The

regime has nothing comparable to the movement's social structures and knows it. Attempts at social and political reform from the government (and Mubarak's National Democratic Party) will be taken as proof that it is the Brotherhood that to some extent decides what issues should be put on the political agenda.

The harsh punishment meted out to former al-Ghad leader Ayman Nour and his colleagues late in 2005 meant that the government saw them as a far more serious threat to the regime than the Brotherhood. The decision of the government to strangle the liberal opposition created a situation whereby the Brotherhood transformed itself into the principal and sole parliamentary opposition group to the Mubarak regime. For the regime, counting on its ability to control the Brotherhood – but at the same time squeezed between American and European pressure to reform and domestic unrest and demands for change – that was a possibility to avoid any real opposition. It seems clear that the regime, counting on its experience in handling the Brotherhood using whatever repressive and restrictive tool necessary, is banking on the Brotherhood to lose some of its popularity when meeting the harsh realities of everyday politics and being exposed to the overall unease with which the Egyptian public, despite its religious affinities, views the imposition of Islamic law as proposed by the Brotherhood. In short, the regime is paying a price for peace and quiet while avoiding, or at least postponing, any real democratisation. Simultaneously, the Mubarak regime will certainly use the Brotherhood as a foil to deter the Americans and alleviate external pressure for more democratisation.

For now at least, that probably suits the Brotherhood since it gives it time and political space to consolidate its position, both within and outside the parliament. With its only rivals, the liberals and the legal parliamentary opposition, severely weakened, the Brotherhood's position, rightly used, can still give ample time to reach closer to the goal where the organisation might be viewed as a real alternative to the regime.

On the broader issue of peace with Israel and US policy in the region, the movement is on safer ground as far as public support is concerned. Already in December 2005, shortly after the elections, both the Brotherhood's General Guide, Mahdi A'kef and the No: 2 man in the movement, Muhammad Habib, came out to state, yet again, demands for Egypt to rescind agreements with

Israel and also to reiterate the anti-semitic leanings of the Brotherhood¹ repeating, among other things, that the Holocaust was a ‘a fable’. On US policy in the Middle East (and towards the Moslem world in general), representatives of the Brotherhood have on numerous occasions accused the Americans to want to wage war against Moslems and to control and dominate all Moslems. Many of these tenets are shared by a much larger public than the immediate constituency of the Brotherhood. By the same token, renouncing violence at home has not stopped the Brotherhood from advocating it abroad, mainly against Israel and coalition forces in Iraq. A key Brotherhood cleric such as Youssef al-Qaradawi, for example, has explicitly condoned suicide bombings against Israelis, including civilians, on the grounds that it is legitimate as a tool of combating the enemy. This is a distinction that has broad support. It is also something the government can use since it is already trying to handle increased opposition to any move or gesture towards Israel over and above what is necessary to maintain the barest minimum of relations. The regime will therefore likely use the Brotherhood’s opposition as a pretext for not expanding cooperation with Israel.

It is still too early to tell just how far the Egyptian Moslem Brotherhood can take its gains at the polls in late 2005, and to what extent these successes can be emulated elsewhere in the Middle East. The Brotherhood in Egypt has spawned chapters in Jordan, Syria and of course among the Palestinians. That the successes of the Brotherhood in Egypt have encouraged Brotherhood activities in other locations is already evident. No doubt were the Egyptian elections important in the run-up to the Palestinian elections. And Hamas can draw on the experience of its parent organisation in Egypt when it comes to dealings with the state and its institutions. Moreover, it is important to realise that in Egypt, in the absence of a political alternative, democratisation will inevitably mean the strengthening of Islamist movements that are not democratic and that will have to undergo a transformation if and when the democratic transformation will occur (see above on ‘optimists’ and ‘realists’).

Having said that, it is equally true that the Egyptian case (or the Palestinian for that matter) hardly merits the warnings of an ‘Islamist flood’ washing over the Middle East. The same kinds of warnings were issued after the Iranian

¹ Both the Egyptian Brotherhood and its Palestinian sister-organisation, Hamas, have in their founding principles several paragraphs that insist that ‘the Jews’ are behind most evils in the World including both world wars for example.

revolution and after the Islamists took power in Sudan. In neither case was there any successful large-scale 'exportation' of the revolution (although not for lack of trying) What the Egyptian case (and the subsequent ones of Lebanon and the Palestinian territories) does is to raise the issue whether it is preferable to permit active political participation of Islamists, limited and controlled, in order to monitor and moderate their activities, as an alternative to perhaps use violence.

In sum then, the Brotherhood in Egypt, carefully watching the government and the current limitations of activity, has had to stick to a cautious road, avoiding confrontations as much as possible and being rather circumspect towards other oppositional groups. This is especially true for the Kifaya movement. Attempts to unite the Kifaya and the Brotherhood have failed, and an important reason for this is that the Brotherhood kept its distance. Since it became clear that the Egyptian government saw the more secular (as it were) opposition (among them the Kifaya movement) as more dangerous than the Brotherhood, it made a lot of sense for the Brotherhood not to get too deeply involved with other oppositional groups. In the spring of 2006 this strategy has shown itself to be very effective and it is clear that the Brotherhood will continue to follow this line.

Hamas

*'We say to this West.....By Allah, you will be defeated....I say to Europe:
Hurry up and apologize to our nation, because if you do not, you will regret it.'*¹

The victory of the Hamas in the Palestinian elections on January 26, 2006, was as much of a surprise for the victors themselves, as it was for most observers. That the movement was poised to do very well at the polls was clear, but that Hamas would receive enough seats in the parliament to form the new cabinet without needing any coalition partners, was a development no one had actually foreseen.

Yet, a lot of the political footwork behind Hamas victory had already been made. After the municipal elections in December 2005, more people (circa 1000 000) lived in municipalities run by Hamas, than in municipalities governed by their main opponent, Fatah (circa 700 000).

Then, as is the case with the other movements discussed here, the victory of Hamas is also part of another, much larger trend in the Middle East. During the past years whenever and wherever there has been free, or relatively free elections, Islamists movements have either won or increased their votes considerably². This development highlights the fact that these movements, after years of repression against more secular (as it were) opposition and worsening repression in general – have often times been the only channels for allowing *any* criticism and/or organised opposition. But it also underlines, yet again, the power of political Islam as a primary framework of identity in the greater Arab Moslem world. Finally it also shows the structural weaknesses of the non-

¹ Adress by Hamas leader Khaled Mashal at the Al-Murabit mosque in Damascus.

Aired by Al-Jazeera , February 3, 2006.

² See for example election results in Iraq, Kuwait and Morocco.

Islamist ideologies and political movements, such as the ‘imported’ Western ideologies of socialism and liberalism which, in their Arab shape, have been rather discredited.

All these trends could be witnessed in the Palestinian case. The victories of Hamas (both in the municipal and in the national elections) are consistent with a change within Palestinian politics since at least the outbreak of the second Intifadah in 2000. That latest round of confrontation, if not outright war, hastened the trend of making the Israeli-Palestinian conflict much more of a religious conflict. This was visible before, with the general Islamisation trends in the Middle East, but the al-Aqsa Intifadah (as it is also called) certainly helped this development along. This suited Hamas of course, who all along had viewed the conflict as essentially a religious one whereby Israel was viewed as a religious affront that had to be destroyed.

The past years have also witnessed a worsening economic situation – very much because of the fight against Israel – where the failure of PA, under Fatah, to run the government, has been very clear to people. The situation also highlighted the rampant corruption inside the PA in general and inside Fatah in particular. As a contrast, Hamas has been able to keep its reputation as ‘clean’, mainly through its social and welfare institutions as well as through its religious propagation institution (Da’wa). Through these institutions, Hamas has been able to provide essential services and assistance to a population deprived of this through the ineptness of its own government (and of course as a consequence of harsh Israeli policies towards the Palestinians). In effect, Hamas created ‘a state within the state’, following a long tradition of Islamic work inside a state. As a corollary, there has been a growing religiosity in the Palestinian society, shown, for instance by a growing number of women wearing the veil and increased attendance in mosques. Finally, the unilateral Israeli withdrawal from Gaza in August 2005 could be presented by Hamas as a military victory.

Another important reason for Hamas’ rise during the last years is the way in which the movement has moulded a new leadership. In the wake of the killings (most importantly the former leaders Ahmad Yassin and Abd al-‘Aziz al-Rantisi) of many of their leaders (including military commanders), the movement has created a sense of collectivity that has fused its parts closer together. This is especially important when it comes to relations between the so

called domestic (meaning inside the Palestinian territories) and external (with the leaders residing mainly in Damascus) parts. Again, in contrast with the much more heterogeneous Fatah, Hamas comes across as a coherent, flexible and strong movement, where the spokespersons are clearly ‘speaking with one tongue’ and with a persistent message.

Furthermore, Hamas has displayed a far better control over the militant parts of the movement than Fatah has over its militants, making sure that no attacks occur without the blessing (in both the literal and rhetorical sense of the word) of the political leadership. In the process, the Palestinian population has clearly been able to compare the terrorising they have been subjected to from various groups associated with Fatah, with the control Hamas has been able to convey.

These problems remain of course and chaos ensues. The new government seems not to be able (even if they wanted to) to control the security situation and the proliferation of arms and criminality remain the same, creating continued anarchy in the area. This was illustrated several times during the first few months of 2006 first during the Danish ‘cartoon issue’ and then after the Israeli seizure of Ahmed Sadaat from a Jericho prison. Both events triggered a spate of violence and kidnappings that the police could and/or would not control or stop. All through spring, the violence between Fatah and Hamas has continued, resulting in both kidnappings and gun battles. Security will remain one of the great challenges ahead for the new Palestinian government. Even though the risk of a full-fledged civil war is perhaps rather small, there is still a possibility of changes in the PA, including the forced resignation of the Hamas government.

In the election campaign, Hamas, attuned to ‘issues of the day’, concentrated on socio-economic issues and the struggle against corruption and for clean government. Talk about long-term goals of a religious state or a radical change of society was toned down¹. In contrast, Fatah failed to adapt to the current concerns of the voters, and tried to climb on the nationalist

¹ It serves to remind the reader that these long-term, rather far-reaching goals, have not been abandoned even though they were toned down during the election campaign. At a press conference in Gaza only a few days after the elections, senior Hamas official and now MP, Sheik Mohammad Abu Teir (one of the more ‘colourful’ of Hamas candidates, and not only for his henna-coloured beard), spelled out some of the domestic agenda of Hamas. In addition to the continuation of the armed struggle against Israel, Abu Teir also promised to introduce Sharia as soon as possible as well as introduce segregated classes in schools, citing Sweden as a warning of what might happen when there is co-education namely ‘a high level of suicides’. *The Globe and the Mail*, Saturday, January 28, 2006.

bandwagon instead by adopting some of Hamas 'struggle' rhetoric about 'liberation' and 'Martyrs'. This failed however, and the results were a thrashing at the polls.

Thus, Hamas victory was perhaps more a result of people voting against Fatah, corrupted and without much credibility left, than a vote for a Sharia-based society of the kind that Hamas stands for. This was an indication of the Palestinian' desire to address local matters and getting some semblance of order domestically and is backed up by some polls indicating continued support for negotiations with Israel for example.

However, the results must also be seen, as was indicated above, as a result of a wider social movement towards religion. An indication of that was of course that there *were* alternatives to Fatah and Hamas, credible opponents to the corrupted PA that had argued for reform and for internal democracy within Fatah. As with Egypt, the secular opposition took a beating and whatever the final outcome, Hamas has gained a position from which the movement can influence and steer much of the political decision-making process. Its long-term views were not hidden and the victory will obviously complicate the already difficult peace-process with Israel, if such a process can be revived. Hamas has stated on many occasions that it sees the Lebanese Hizb'allah as a role model. Hizb'allah, which operates as a political party and at the same time keeps its military apparatus intact, is in a position where it can pressure other Lebanese political actors. Thus, Hamas has steadfastly refused to disarm and has clearly stated that it will not cease its attacks on Israel, when such attacks are deemed necessary¹.

Judging by countless statements (before as well as after the elections) by Hamas leaders, it seems clear that, for now at least, there is no inclination to change fundamentally towards a more peaceful and moderated agenda. Talk about and later the introduction of sanctions (from the EU and the US for instance) seems to have had very little effect. Instead, Hamas has grabbed

¹Khaled Mashal on Al-Jazeera, aired on January 29, 2006. www.memritv.org. Special Dispatch – Palestinian Authority, January 31, 2006.

every opportunity to use to its advantage the ambivalence, ambiguity and outright splits within the international community towards their victory¹.

On the domestic arena, Hamas itself is projecting ambivalence and ambiguity both towards dealings with President Abbas and on the issue of peace negotiations with Israel by alternately opposing and condoning talks between Abbas and the Israelis for example (which would bypass the new PA government)², as well as by rejecting pressure (from other Arab governments) to adopt the Arab League peace plan of 2002, and, and at the same time, saying it could be ‘considered’, provided Israel accepts it first³.

Another indication of which way Hamas ultimately will choose can perhaps be gleaned by looking at the conditions – discussed above – necessary for political co-optation to really take place and take hold. Of these conditions, hardly any of the potentially moderating factors are present. This of course given that Hamas *wants* to reform.

The first condition, having to do with the existence of a political system into which the Islamists can be drawn, is definitely not present. Existing political, security and other Palestinian institutions are in shambles. Hamas is getting into the government without having disarmed and even if its militia is probably better disciplined than any of the others, it is in no position to be the institution that imposes calm and quiet even if Hamas wants to.

Second, there are no functioning ‘checks and balances’ to work as leverage on Hamas’ extremist tendencies. It is more a question of a local balance of terror, where various militia groupings, some political, some purely criminal and some a combination of both, are vying with each other, making sure that no one gain complete power. To make matters worse, the threshold that the Palestinians *did* have for political participation was lifted before the elections⁴. The Palestinian election law for the 2006 elections (enacted in June 2005), contains no special rules by which the candidates must abide. Furthermore, the ongoing conflict with Israel adds fuel to the fire of the domestic Palestinian

¹ Cases in point are invitations from groups, political parties or the government in Norway, Sweden, Russia (who together with the EU is part of the ‘Quartet’) and South Africa to Hamas. Invitations that have been accepted and materialised. This is in addition to the by no means unequivocal support Hamas is getting from some Arab states such as Saudi-Arabia and obviously Iran.

² *Haaretz*, May 3, 2006 (web edition).

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ The 1995 Israeli-Palestinian Interim Agreement (on the West Bank and Gaza strip), article III (2) in Annex II, explicitly disqualifies from Palestinian elections “any candidates, parties or coalitions...[that] commit or advocate racism or pursue the implementation of their aims by unlawful or non-democratic means”. This was introduced with Hamas in mind.

chaos and provides no incentive to disarm. On the contrary, it provides an excuse for keeping arms. As long as Hamas' political and military power enhance each other, the organisation will easily fend off any pressure to disarm. The unilateral Israeli withdrawal from Gaza in August 2005, is viewed as proof of the success of this policy.

Finally, given the sense in the international community that there is an urgency to move on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it seems as though there simply is no possibility for letting the Palestinian domestic policy play its course long enough for Hamas to finish its political socialisation, even if the organisation wanted to.

In the internal Palestinian arena, then, the strategy that Hamas will choose is long-term and cautious. Hamas will build up and strengthen future capabilities instead of raking in immediate gains. It will try to co-opt Fatah instead of confronting it, incrementally establishing its hegemony instead of bullying the opposition, and use the power position gained from the election. Hamas will try to use Abu Mazen instead of dumping him, calm down the security forces instead of trying to purge them, at least for now; and finally, live with existing arrangements instead of trying to scrap them (including agreements with Israel).

All this will be to ensure as much calm as can be had, but to allow for responses towards Israel when the organisation deems it to be to its advantage. Thus, Hamas will want to reach an armistice agreement with Israel, including agreements concerning economic arrangements. This will also go a long way in assuring at least some Europeans that the 'quiet' Hamas can help to build, will be enough to fulfill the 'conditions' for recognition. In short, enough political footwork will be made to keep at least some financial aid coming through, and this without having to change anything fundamentally in its position towards Israel, peace or democracy.

In other words, instead of peace and a permanent solution, Hamas envisages a temporary but long-term settlement – no peace, but no war either. Hamas will certainly change some of its behaviour, but hardly its essence. It will probably keep as many options open as it can (by for example linking itself more with Iran and Hizb'allah to receive aid, arms and perhaps even training) and preparing for the ultimate struggle with Israel.

For Israel, which in essence is losing a partner willing to negotiate any permanent long-term solution to the conflict, and is facing pressure from the

EU to allow the new PA to function (for humanitarian reasons) the inclination towards more unilateral moves will deepen when looking at the prospect of a weak dysfunctional Palestinian government and strong Hamas,. The new Kadima-dominated Israeli government has already indicated (even before the elections in March) that the unilateral road is the preferred one..

Furthermore, the election results point to another asymmetry of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. At precisely the time when a majority of the Israeli people has accepted not just the political necessity but also the moral legitimacy of a Palestinian state, the Palestinians voted for an ideology that is dead-set against the kind of peace that this entails, by for example denying the holocaust and enshrining the classic anti-semitic text, the *Protocols of the elders of Zion*.

Thus, long-term prospects of real peace – just not the absence of war – look bleak. Hamas leaders, both within the Palestinian areas and outside, have declared that even though they realise that, for now, the destruction of Israel cannot be achieved, that long-term goal remains and must not be removed from the agenda. A hudna (truce) is permissible, but not recognition or negotiations towards a full peace.

Therefore, Hamas position is rather strong and chances are that the organisation will be able to keep and enhance its position in the Palestinian society for a long time. When it comes to relations with the international community, both Hamas' long-term strategy and short-term tactics might work. This is because it will be very difficult for the outside world to avoid dealing with Hamas altogether for the reasons indicated above. The result could be that instead of trying to 'solve' the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Europe will opt for just 'handling it', being satisfied with 'the absence of war'. In this, they will have a willing partner in Hamas¹.

¹ It's important to note that the new Israeli government have indicated a readiness to deal directly with Hamas on the grounds that that is necessary to avoid a humanitarian crisis and that similarly, Hamas has not excluded dealing with Israel in practical matters.

Hizb'allah

*'No one can imagine the importance of our military potential as our military apparatus is not separate from our overall social fabric.'*¹

In the aftermath of the so called 'Cedar Revolution' in Lebanon – following the Syrian-instigated murder of former Lebanese Premier Rafik Hariri and the forced Syrian troop-withdrawal (but not of the Intelligence structure) from Lebanon, the new Lebanese government included, for the first time, members of the Hizb'allah². The organisation was already represented in parliament. They now have two ministers and one that is endorsed by them.

Hizb'allah – a Shi'a movement that gets almost all its domestic support from within that community in Lebanon – took, with the inclusion in the new Lebanese government, an important step in its political development. It was a mark both of the importance and influence the movement has in Lebanon, as well as an acknowledgement – on part of other ethnic groups in Lebanon – of the power Hizb'allah has, due to it being the only movement from the civil war that still retains its arms³. This last point is important since it explains, to a great extent, why the movement is still such an important player in Lebanon. In southern Lebanon, long the 'heartland' of the Shi'a community in that country,

¹ From a slightly abridged version of: "*Nass al-Risala al-Maftuha allati wajahaha Hizballah ila-l-Mustad'afin fi Lubnan wa-l-Alam*". First published as an Open Letter on February 16, 1985 in the Lebanese daily al-Safir. It was subsequently published as a brochure as well, where the Hizb'allah program were laid down and explained. This translation was published in: *The Jerusalem Quarterly*, No: 48, Fall, 1988.

² Hizb'allah was created in 1982 as an outcome of the Lebanese civil war and has its origins and ideology from the Iranian revolution. Though the main goal remain to establish an Islamist government across the Arab Moslem world, leaders of the movement have also stated that it is a genuine Lebanese movement intent on working for Islamisation of Lebanon, but within Lebanese political parameters. Since 1992, it has participated in Lebanese elections as a political party. In the general election in 2005, Hizb'allah won – together with the other major Shia movement, AMAL, with whom they formed an alliance – all 23 seats contested in the south of Lebanon.

³ In fact, since the end of the civil war in 1990, Hizb'allah has used the time to stock up on weapons such as medium distance missiles and a wealth of smaller arms.

the movement has created ‘a state within a state’. This has not changed fundamentally since the Israeli withdrawal in May 2000, and the movement has consistently resisted any calls to disarm, despite demands from both the UN and the Lebanese government¹. The refusal to disarm, and the inability (or unwillingness) of the Lebanese government to pressure Hizb’allah to do so and to extend its army control to the south, give the movement a free hand. With its military wing the movement has a regional relevance that its opposition lacks. Being part of the government makes it even harder to pressure the movement to disarm. Even more moderate suggestions of having the armed wing of Hizb’allah incorporated within the regular army have met with resistance from the movement, as well as reluctance on the part of other groups fearing that the confessional balance in the army will be disrupted. Recent research² shows that any attempt to forcefully trying to disarm Hizb’allah would clearly result in renewed internal fighting in Lebanon. Thus, for now the Lebanese government will choose to ignore demands from the international community and leave the issue and instead try to handle the issue in the so called ‘national dialogue’..

Hizb’allahs ascent to the inner echelons of power in Lebanon, without having to either disarm or change any of its long-term goals or strategic choices, makes the movement an example of a successful Islamist movement which has managed to balance a long-term strategy with local political tactics. The fact that the movement is still defined as a terrorist organization by some key players in the West (most notably the US) has not been such an impediment as to force it to reconsider either policy options or strategic moves. On the contrary, the development into an even more active political player has made demands from Hizb’allah to change society into a more ‘Islamic’ one and to fight against, and destroy, Israel, even more pronounced³. The successes achieved by Hizb’allah so far can arguably be seen as an endorsement of the validity of the present tactic, i.e. adapting to the (local and external) political constraints without changing or discarding any long-term, strategic goals.

¹ In addition to the UNSCR 1559 (which calls for disarmament of armed groups, meaning but not naming Hizb’allah as well as calls on the Lebanese government to extend its authority to the whole country, i.e. including the south), renewed calls for disarmament came late in December 2005 from both the UN and Lebanese Premier Siniora, after Hizb’allah fired rockets into the Israeli town of Kiryat Shmona.

² ‘Origins in Popular Support for Hezbollah’, Simon Haddad. In: *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Vol. 29, 2006. p. 21-34.

³ References as to the necessity to destroy Israel has been an integral part of Hizb’allahs program since the original program of Hizb’allah was published in 1985.

However, there are real limitations as well that might force the hand of the movement in the future. First of all is the natural limitation to growth constituted by the fact that Hizb'allah is solidly placed within the Shi'a community. Even though this is the largest minority in Lebanon, so far the movement has not been able to extend any real influence outside this community¹, thus limiting the party's claim to be a true national party.

Second is the danger of actually alienating its own constituency in the south by continued armed attacks against Israel, not only in the so called Sheba Farms², but also in rocket attacks against Israeli targets in the Galilee. Israeli responses to these attacks are creating anger and resentment against the movement. This is especially true about the Sheba Farms, since the majority of the Lebanese, and not only in the south, lack any affinity to the place. Since the UN itself has declared that Israel, through the withdrawal in 2000, has left all occupied Lebanese territory, continued military actions in the south are carried out without the support of the local population.

It appears that the movement is aware of these constraints and has tried to counter it with heightened social activity and an emphasis on rebuilding the infrastructure and creating jobs and opportunities for the population. It has always acted as a provider of social goods to the Shi'a population and is well aware of its role in this regard.

A third limiting factor, and for the international community perhaps the most problematic one, is the deep ties between Hizb'allah and its patrons in Syria and Iran. Syrian influence has been discussed as being more of the 'tactical' kind. When it has been in Syrian interest to heat up the border with Israel for example, Hizb'allah has been 'used' to create troubles. However, without denying the importance of Syrian support for the movement (practically all of Hizb'allah's arms and munitions goes through Syrian territory for example), or downplaying the political support Hizb'allah gets from Syria³, it is clear from the latest developments in Lebanon that Hizb'allah has, albeit carefully, distanced itself somewhat from Damascus and reiterated

¹ Ibid Haddad.

² The Sheba Farms are, according to both the UN and Israel part of Syria, and were occupied by Israel during the 6-day war in 1967. Hizb'allah has claimed that the territory is part of Lebanon and that it is therefore in its right to continue to 'resist' Israeli occupation. Discussions have been going on between Lebanon and Syria (who still does not recognise Lebanon as an independent state, refusing for example to create diplomatic relations with Beirut) about the area, but so far nothing has come out of these discussions.

³ It is for example an 'open secret' that Hizb'allahs current Secretary General, Hassan Nasrallah, is very close to Syrian President Assad, and is received more often than most non-Syrians by the President.

its commitment as a Lebanese movement. It is also clear that the goals of Hizb'allah do not coincide with those of Syria all the time. Partly this is explained by a realisation on the side of Hizb'allah that the day might come when Syria feels that the use of Hizb'allah is no longer worth the trouble and when that day comes, the movement cannot be too closely identified with Syria, a country whose regime is resented by a many Lebanese.

Iran is another matter altogether. Iran was not only instrumental in creating Hizb'allah in the 1980's, it is still, by far, the most active and important external supporter of Hizb'allah, financially as well as politically. Of even greater importance is the ongoing support from Iran to ease cooperation between Hizb'allah and Palestinian groups such as Hamas. Since 1992, when over 400 Hamas activists were deported by Israel to Lebanon, relations between Hamas and Hizb'allah have developed. Today, with the rise of Hamas to the government of the PA, this relationship has taken on a new meaning, and has greatly helped Iran and Syria in cementing their influence over Hizb'alah as well as extending it towards Hamas. Religious differences aside, and they are of course real between the Sunnis in Hamas and the Shi'as in Hizb'allah and in Iran, having the common enemy of Israel (and through Israel, the US and the West in general), has made that kind of cooperation interesting for all parties concerned¹.

For Lebanon as a whole, the fact that Hizb'allah now acts as a conduit between Iran and Palestinian groups such as Hamas is of concern, since it does complicate relations with the West as well as with Israel and Syria. The problems and drawbacks of having let Hizb'allah run its own administration in the south and not even tried to get the movement to disarm, are now very clear. Continued tension with Israel is not necessarily in the national Lebanese interest and it does make a normalisation of the country after the political killings in 2004 and 2005 (not only of former premier Hariri) much more difficult.

Of even greater concern are reports of heightened cooperation between Hizb'allah and al-Qaida-affiliated groups in Lebanon². These developments were also of great concern to the former PA government who asked the EU to ban Hizb'allah as the organisation tried to undermine the peace process with

¹ See for example *Middle East Intelligence Bulletin* (MEIB), Vol. 4, No 2, February 2002 and October 2002. See also: *Jerusalem Report*, March 6, 2006. 'The Specter of Iran'. Leslie Susser. p.12-14.

² See for example Yoni Figchel & Yael Shahar: 'The al-Qaida-Hizballah Connection', ICT-report February 26, 2002. Also: Matthew Levitt: 'Ban Hizballah in Europe', *Policy Watch* # 958, February 16, 2005.

Israel by, among other activities, helping al-Qaida individuals to get a foothold in Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon¹.

Using Hizb'allah as a conduit, not only Hamas, but also Palestinian groups such as the al Aqsa Martyrs Brigades and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, receive support from Iran. The purpose is of course to frustrate peace efforts between Israel and the Palestinians, a goal that Hizb'allah fully endorses. As long as those peace prospects look dim, which is certainly the case right now, there are no real possibilities for any peace ouvertures between Israel and Lebanon which also suits Hizb'allah.

The question is of course for how long Hizb'allah can, or will, maintain this balance between strategic and tactical goals. So far it has worked rather well, making the movement's regional position only stronger. That the movement, at the same time as it is strong and influential in Lebanon, is susceptible to pressure is equally true. However, without such pressure it is equally certain that at least for now, there are no real incentives for Hizb'allah to moderate its stance, either towards Israel or any domestic opponent. Sheik Nasrallah's threat of using '12 000 rockets' against anyone who tries to disarm them should not be discarded as mere propaganda.

On the domestic scene, there appear to be no sign towards heightened pressure on the movement to disarm, or letting the army deploy in the south along the Israeli border. On the international scene, there are likewise no real efforts to pressure the Lebanese government to change its stance against Hizb'allah. The issue is buried for now in the so called 'National Dialogue'. Even the US government has stated that if the movement disarms, contacts with it are not ruled out. As for the EU, the consensus seems to be that as long as Hizb'allah is in the government and plays by the rules, there is very little that can be done to make it change. Contacts with Lebanon have not been negatively affected by the decision to include Hizb'allah in the government.

The fact that very little pressure is actively directed against the movement right now could conceivably change if the movement's role in connection with terrorist groups such as al-Qaida gets more attention. Relations with Iran, which apart from its nuclear stance rather aggressively pursues an active foreign policy in the region, could also change this. International consequences

¹ Ibid. Also: Amos Harel, 'Group tied to Qaida has post near Lebanese border', *Haaretz*, March 13, 2006. (web edition).

of a more active role of Hizb'allah in the Palestinian territories is also a concern the movement has to bear in mind, since this could adversely affect Lebanon's relations with other countries as well.

In conclusion then, it seems that Hizb'allah understands that its political strategy within the Lebanese political context must take into account four major constituencies:

First is of course the need to retain the loyalty of the Shi'as in Lebanon. Without support from them, no victory will be forthcoming at the ballot box (or otherwise) and that group will ensure the longevity of the movement.

Second, the organisation also needs to be accepted as a legitimate political player within the larger Lebanese polity. This will be much harder to achieve, not the least since the ultimate aim of Hizb'allah, the Islamisation of society, will not be supported by many of the non-Shia Lebanese. The aspirations are there however, and one way the movement is trying to 'reach out' to a larger community is its emphasis on positioning itself as the patron of the economically disadvantaged, regardless of religious or communal identity. As an example of activity in this regard, one can look at the movement's involvement in various trade unions.

Third is the necessity to deal with Syria. Hizb'allah maintains good relations with the regime in Damascus (which is at odds with its nationalist credentials, especially after the Syrian-instigated murder of former Lebanese Premier Rafik Hariri), but for a movement with ambition to be seen as a true Lebanese nationalist movement, this can often be a problem. Syrian support for Hizb'allah is obviously dependent on Syrian self-interest. As mentioned above, the day might come when Hizb'allah's resistance is no longer of any use to Syria, and this is a driving force behind Hizb'allah's attempts to 'branch out' to a larger constituency.

Finally, there is the relation with Iran. This is arguably the most important external actor that influences Hizb'allah and Tehran remains constantly in the background (and sometimes in the forefront too) when Hizb'allah charts its way through the often treacherous Lebanese political waters. In the Iranian long-term strategy of creating spheres of influence across Shi'a-dominated areas of the Middle East, Hizb'allah plays a key role. Through Hizb'allah, Iran can and has extended its influence, not only in Lebanon and Syria, but also into the Palestinian areas. Iranian dominance over key-factors in supporting Hizb'allah such as finance and military aid, is one of the most important impediments to getting the movement to moderate its stance, if that is what the

international community – as well as other Lebanese actors – really wants. That Hizb’allah should, of its own volition, disarm, change or moderate itself is at present therefore highly unlikely.

Thus, to sum up the discussion so far, in all three cases, political credibility has been gained and the advantages of continuing to take part in politics, to various extent and on various levels, are obvious. From a strategic point of view, there are no real contradictions between the long-term goals and short-term, tactical concessions for the sake of peace and quiet. The situation allows the movements to keep building their platforms, resist disarmament (in the cases of Hamas and Hizb’allah) and use participatory politics to further goals that are in some cases inherently un-democratic and even racist¹.

Given the growing support for Islamism in the Arab Moslem world, support for Islamist movements and parties such as Hamas, Hizb’allah and the Egyptian Moslem Brotherhood should come as no surprise. It deserves to be mentioned again at this juncture, that the key issue is not whether or not to let Islamist movements or parties take part in politics. This they already do². At stake is rather how to handle their inclusion and whether or not to pressure them to change. Whatever tactic chosen, it is imperative that the local context is taken into account since the cases discussed here are different enough not to try a ‘one-size-fits-all’ policy-approach.

Having said that, however, it is equally important to point out similarities between the movements. Of special importance, not the least since this factor often gets little attention by external observers, is the religious imperative constituting a founding principle of all the movements discussed here. The long-term goal of creating a religious state based on religious law has already been mentioned. At the end of the 1960’s a leading theologian within the Moslem Brotherhood was Muhammed Ghazzali. Laying down some fundamental tenets of their theology, Ghazzali argued that God is the sole source of lawmaking and that therefore, there was no need for human lawmaking. Everything is already decided by God. All answers to all human

¹ See for example Hamas founding charter (a covenant first published in 1988). Likewise see writings of Moslem Brotherhood founder Hassan al-Banna as well as subsequent writing of Islamist ideologue Sayid Qutb. Especially his book ‘signposts on the road’ is instructive for understanding the religious ideological underpinnings of Islamism.

² It should perhaps be pointed out that Islamist parties are present in many other countries in the Middle East as well. Suffice it here to just mention Jordan and Turkey, where Islamist parties play important roles in their respective country.

problems can therefore be found in the Koran and in the Sunna. It is the Ulema (the religious ‘councils’) that are to represent the people. And since God is the sole lawmaker, all laws are religious. In short, he depicted a theocracy as the ideal¹. These ideological tenets also have bearings on relations with the state as well as with external actors. The conflict with the West however goes even deeper than that with the State. The underlying notion that only God can rule² means that the modern Nation-state is inherently corrupt (humans trying to take the place of God) and has to be combated. The Western, Westfalian idea of the State as something secular, is even more problematic for the Islamist *Weltanschauung*. The overall long-term goal for Islamists everywhere is, on one level, to mould a society where Islam is purged of all ‘sinful’, ‘wrong’ or ‘harmful’ practices and on the other, to crush all ‘enemies’ be they other Moslems, ‘crusaders’ or a particular state. This ‘goal’ is not seen as being achievable in any near future. On the contrary, this struggle is eternal and even after such a society is reached, enemies will persist so a constant vigilance is necessary.

Furthermore, Islam is of course a religious tradition that (like Christendom) has a universal message. I.e. it is supposed to be fit for everybody everywhere. This universalism sometimes helps to blur the borders between various local and regional conflicts and the more ‘global’ struggle Islamists are pursuing. Again, this is certainly no impediment to engagement in local politics and an adaptation to specific contexts. On the contrary, pragmatism and a keen sense of what this local context means, are trademarks of the Islamist movements dealt with here. However, since these fundamental principles are never really questioned (and also often are deliberately downplayed by the movements themselves) they could constitute a rather large obstacle to long-term peaceful co-existence and peacemaking.

In addition, the fact that the Islamists purport to side with the weaker part (always a Moslem of course) makes it more difficult to condemn Islamist activity outright, since there is nearly always issues that many Moslems, outside the Islamist movements, find it important to support. This ambiguity, in itself, helps pave the way for Islamist ‘inroads’ into mainstream Islamist thinking and debate.

¹ Hedin 2005, p. 94-95.

² Two of the most important ideologues of Islamists overall, Sayid Qutb and Abu al-ala al-Mawdudi called it *hakimiyyat Allah*/the realm of God.

Of more immediate interest, especially from a policy point of view, is perhaps the way in which these movements look upon conflict resolution, both short- and long-term and domestic as well as external.

Domestically, all three movements have emphasised the importance of Islam as the only really good alternative to follow. This does of course first and foremost concern other Moslems. However, it is not difficult to find statements encouraging non-Moslems to ‘repent’ and convert. At the very least, non-Moslems are advised to be ‘peaceful’ and/or not to take part in activity ‘against Moslems’¹. Respect and tolerance for non-Moslems are of course also there, but that is based on the premise that the non-Moslems are in a minority.

When it comes to external ‘enemies’ the tone becomes harsher. First and foremost of these comes of course Israel. All three movements are advocating the destruction of Israel as a prerequisite for a long-term peaceful ‘solution’ to the Arab-Israeli conflict (which is often presented, by the Islamists, as a religious conflict between Moslems and Jews). This is argued with various degrees of intensity and, as is the case with Hamas for example, is presented as possible to achieve in stages, thus paving the way for tactical compromises². This goes for the Moslem Brotherhood in Egypt as well. Some of its leaders have come out publicly stating that agreements with Israel could be honoured by the movement. At the same time, however, the Brotherhood said it was not going to retract its non-recognition of Israel. It would continue to advocate boycotting the country and opposing the peace agreement with Israel. Underlying these approaches is the notion of Palestine as a Waqf, or land that once belonged to Moslems and that cannot be given up. Again, this is not an absolute obstacle to *any* changes, but it is at the same time a notion that should not be underestimated as an obstacle to peaceful co-existence. If the issue is looked upon as a religious one (which the Islamists do), it becomes much harder to compromise; either you believe or you do not. As long as Israel is perceived as a religious affront to all Moslems, the scope for compromise is indeed narrow, at least for the time being. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that this will be one of the major challenges ahead, for all concerned parties.

¹ Among several examples see: Hizb’allahs Open Letter from 1985. Ibid note 1, page 31. Also: Hamas covenant (note article 13 and 15 among other). Finally, on the Egyptian Moslem Brotherhood: www.memritv.org, Inquiry & Analysis – Egypt/Reform Project, February 28, 2006, ‘Egyptian Intellectuals Speak Out Against the Muslim Brotherhood Movement and its Slogan “Islam is the Solution”.’

² Again examples abound. Suffice it here to mention a fairly common approach as shown by Hamas Political Bureau deputy head, Musa Abu Marzouq in an interview to Dream TV on February 13, 2006. www.memritv.org, Special Dispatch – Palestinian Authority, February 22, 2006.

Developments in the cases discussed here, as well as those in other contexts such as Iraq, will provide additional clues to where Islamist political participation might lead. Since growing support for Islamists is a recurring theme in various constituencies, regimes around the Middle East might be convinced that to maintain internal stability (as they see it) allowing Islamist participation is a small price to pay for neutralising external pressure for more far-reaching political reforms.

Conclusions

‘The only thing that’s going to solve this is rational minds, a lot of sitting down and talking until you’re blue in the gills’.¹

In conclusion then, there are some overall goals common to all the movements dealt with here. The important differences notwithstanding (see above), what Islamist movements, whether Sunni or Shi’a based, have in common in the make-up of their ideological underpinnings does matter.

First is perhaps the importance attributed to the strategic goal of the establishment of a religious State. This state should be based on religious law as it is laid down in the Sharia. There is, however, an understanding that these goals cannot be achieved in a short time and there is also an understanding that the ‘armed struggle’ (including terrorism, even if it is not called that) in itself cannot bring this about. Here the emphasis differ between the movements. This is obviously due to the different circumstances the movements operate under, but it is noteworthy that in regard to these long-term goals, there is no real disagreement as to the necessity of armed struggle for achieving peace and justice for the people concerned.

Second is the notion that in choosing to participate in the political process, it has not, so far at least, been necessary to disown or fundamentally change any of the basic strategic end-goals. In the cases of Hamas and Hizb’allah, nor has it been necessary to dissolve or dismantle their armed wings to reach that participation. In essence, it has been possible to have the cake and eat it too. For example, what was demanded from the international community for bestowing legitimacy on Hamas (namely disarmament, renouncing violence and recognising Israel) was not only not implemented by the movement, but there was no price to pay for not doing it. The same goes for Hizb’allah and the demand for disarmament. As has been shown, the rhetoric on part of the

¹ Director Steven Spielberg, commenting on the Arab-Israeli conflict in Time magazine. Quote in an article by Dennis Prager, January 31, 2006 at: Townhall.com

Quartet (which is of paramount interest here) was, when push came to shove, mostly just that.

Leaving the Moslem Brotherhood aside for a moment, it is of course easy enough to point out that the reality on the ground is that largely unreformed Hamas and Hizb'allah are already parts of the political set-up in their respective country and that the international community has to deal with that. The question then becomes if and for how long this state of affairs should be allowed to last? When exactly are Hamas and Hizb'allah supposed to change, considering that they need some 'grace-time' to overcome domestic obstacles to changing fundamental tenets? Evidence points solidly to the fact that so far, the leadership of these movements have been very explicit in saying that they do not intend to change, but this does not mean that temporary concessions are ruled out in the mean-time. Hizb'allah (and of course the Moslem Brotherhood in Egypt) has been involved longer than Hamas in politics. Hizb'allah is in the government and Hamas just took it over after winning the elections in a legitimate democratic process. All this has been achieved without any concessions given in the form of changing fundamental tenets or, more importantly perhaps, disarming (especially in the case of Hizb'allah). Allowing for this, the alternative left for the international community (and domestic critics alike) seems to be to force change after the fact of these movements having gained what they could from participating in contemporary political life. But the 'sticks' supposed to be used to force change (non-recognition, boycotts and withheld economic aid) have proved to be rather empty of content. At the same time, the 'carrots' (recognition, legitimacy and to a certain extent aid) are already, in practice, bestowed on them. This is not only because of the fact that the outside actors feel forced to interact with the movements anyway (if for no other reason to avoid humanitarian disasters), thus giving 'de-facto' legitimacy, but also because the sanctions or threats of sanctions have been used locally to paint the Islamists as the real defenders of the people from the supposed injustices of the Europeans and the Americans, trying to 'impose' solutions from the outside¹. In short, election returns stemming from participation in politics will – and will probably continue to – encourage Islamists to stay the course of pragmatism, since this in no way forces them to change long-term strategic thinking.

¹ As an example of this argument, see interview with Hamas leader Mahmoud Al-Zahar on Al-Manar TV on January 25, 2006. www.memritv.org. Special Dispatch – Palestinian Authority, February 1, 2006. No: 1083.

So far political participation has looked different for the movements depending on where they stand. For the Moslem Brotherhood in Egypt, the current limitations have made them stick to a cautious road, avoiding an all-out confrontation with the government, taking a back-seat as the regime clobbered the secular (and in the eyes of the government more dangerous) opposition, silently waiting in the wings and carefully choosing when and where to make a move. This tactic proved to be rather successful to judge by the results from the parliamentary elections. There is no doubt that the movement will continue to stay the course, banking on the governments inability to show any real alternatives in the long run to the social and political structures being built by the movement. But with the exception of the decision taken in 1971, when it renounced violence (at home, but not necessarily abroad), no other major concessions have really been forced from the Brotherhood.

Moving on to Hamas, whose political environment looks different, its gains at the polls have nevertheless come about without any major concessions being made. They do of course have a threat hanging over their heads in the form of possible Israeli counter-strikes (not least in the form of targeted assassinations), but the deal struck with the PA and President Abbas in March 2005 gave them the legitimacy needed to participate without any other concessions than to refrain from an all-out conflict with the then Fatah-run PA, something Hamas was never contemplating anyway. The Israelis can of course always hit Hamas hard if they so choose, but the longer Hamas is being able to stay in power and can show that it can ‘deliver’ peace and quiet, the harder it will be to dislodge it. Hamas then, can be relatively secure and will do its utmost to maintain a ceasefire (regardless of whether it is called a Hudna or something else). They will also avoid any discussions on long-term changes and keep their arms and militant structures intact, thus retaining a ‘stick’ (albeit small) that will be enough to avoid any attempts to disarm them. This situation is even more severe now after Palestinian President Abbas’ ultimatum (in June 2006) about a referendum on implicitly recognising Israel and on the future borders of Palestine.

Hizb’allah, finally is now inside the Lebanese government and has reached a position from which it can pursue its goals of peacefully working to convert Lebanon into an Islamist state. Again, this has come about thanks to a combination of savvy political and social work and the role as a true defender

of Lebanese independence in the face of Israeli occupation. Hizb'allah will be careful not to overstep any domestic boundaries, but at the same time stay in a position to resist any moves to try to disarm it, in effect, being a 'state-within the state' in Lebanon. The conflict with Israel, despite the withdrawal in 2000, means that the movement will keep the situation at the border tense (without necessarily bringing it to boiling point), knowing that their domestic position in no small part depends on them retaining their militia and keeping their dominant position in the south without trying to alienate the local population too much.

Basically, none of the movements dealt with here has shown any willingness to change any basic tenets of their ideology, or showed any will to compromise with the notion that the solution to the conflict with Israel is that that country is 'wiped out' (to use the words of another Islamist, the Iranian President). Whether the movements are 'inside' or 'outside' the fleshpots of politics, external threats of sanctions and listings as terrorist have so far not been effective in forcing changes towards a more democratic and/or peaceful stance. For the immediate future, this will not mean that short-term compromises will not occur. On the contrary, that fits in nicely with the long-term view that the movements have of themselves and the reading of Islamic history that they all share.

At the end of the day, therefore, it seems to be a case of watching whose ideology will win the evolutionary combat; the western (rather short-term) one of basically hoping that 'being inside' will in itself be enough to induce change, or the Islamist (much more long-term) one with the goal set on the distant future when all and sundry will be Moslems if only one is patient enough.



REGERINGSKANSLIET

Ministry for Foreign Affairs

Middle East and North Africa
Department

Seminar on Radical Islamist Movements in the Middle East on 15 June 2006 - an Analytical Summary

Introduction to the seminar and the project

Mr Peter Tejler and Ms Ulla Gudmundson, the Heads of the Middle East and North Africa Department (MENA) and the Policy Analysis Office (ANA), respectively, of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, greeted the well-attended seminar, which gathered some forty participants from the Government Offices, various government authorities and institutions as well as academia in Sweden. It was explained that Chatham House rules would apply to the discussion and that the contributions in the debate would be summarized in an analytical way without attributions.

Mr Tejler explained that the terms of reference of the joint MENA-ANA project were to analyse trends and prospects in the internal developments in some radical Islamist movements in the Middle East. The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Hamas in the Palestinian Territories and Hizbollah in Lebanon had been chosen as examples. The perspective was contemporary and the focus above all political and social, since these movements carry out open political and social activities within their respective societies alongside more militant activities. Nevertheless, it is violent activity such as terrorist acts which at times attracts public and media attention the most. The purpose of the project was to supplement the wealth of material on these movements: studies of their historical and theological roots and contemporary ideologies as well as studies with a focus on terrorism. With this complementary view, it was hoped, a better basis could be obtained for formulating official Swedish positions on issues that could arise. The project should be policy relevant without leading up to any policy decisions.

The Ministry had commissioned a study by Mr Magnus Norell, Ph D, of the Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI), an advance copy of which had been distributed to the participants. The report, as requested by the ToR, contained some conclusions but no policy recommendations. Together with the comments of the invited discussant, Mr Max Rodenbeck, Middle East correspondent of The

Economist, and an analytical summary of the seminar, the study would constitute the result of the project to be publicized after the summer. The project would hopefully contribute to furthering discussion and a deeper understanding of the issues, which were known to give rise to strongly held and widely differing opinions. The study produced by Dr Norell illustrated this by being a thought-provoking, some would even say provocative, basis for the debate at the seminar.

Presentation of the report

Dr Norell referred to the summary and conclusions of his study and made only a few supplementary remarks. He underlined that the swift developments in the region made any day-to-day judgements precarious. The study therefore took a broad view and tried to present the essence of the issues with clear-cut arguments.

Contrary to what many in the West had fully realized, the movements in question were already very much part of the political scene. As to the reactions to this, it was difficult to discern any clear line in the international community's position. If there was a real wish to influence the movements, a political choice had to be made. One major option was to 'play hard-ball' and force change, something Dr Norell did not think would happen. The measures taken against Hamas so far did not point in that direction, but even if harsher methods were to be applied, they still would not influence Hamas but rather reinforce it. The other major option was an inclusive one. If the international community really wanted to let the movements onto the political stage and involve itself positively with them in spite of the risks involved, this should be done to a full extent. That would be better than half-hearted measures, but this option did not seem to have been chosen either.

The second point Dr Norell underlined concerned the role of religion and the fundamental tenets for these movements. Ideology was more important to them than many in the surrounding world had realized. The groups were very serious in their beliefs and would not change them easily. Their social work, for example, derived directly from their ideology.

Comments by the discussant

Mr Rodenbeck praised the report in general but took exception to some of its conclusions, in particular concerning the degree of changeability

of the movements in question. He suggested that context had to be considered thoroughly when discussing policy. First, in dealing with these groups it was crucial to look at the situation in which they were formed and which had helped them to thrive. All three were opposition forces, created to oppose a ruling structure, whether seen as imperialist (Britain in Egypt), settler-colonialist (as Hamas saw Israel) or discriminatory (as Shias perceived their place in Lebanon).

The movements had (until now) enjoyed the luxury of making their argument in isolation from real questions of governance and policy. Furthermore, all three enshrined the notion of 'resistance' and emphasized that existing structures had failed to protect the people, e.g. from Westernization or Israel. It had to be noted that while the core supporters were ideology-driven, the groups' wider constituencies were passive, giving support because they believed that existing structures had failed. Lastly, all three movements were the product of societies living under severe forms of stress, through demographic change, displacement, urbanization, unemployment, violence, etc.

On the issue of changeability, Mr Rodenbeck thought that the groups might be more adaptable than suggested in the report. A proven way to change them was changing the context in which they operated. For example, if the 'external threat' to which they were opposed were to be seen as receding, the reason to 'resist' would be fading. Some 'carrots' had been delivered but many more could be extended such as the recognition by Israel of a Palestinian state within defined borders, the resolution of the Shebaa Farm issue, or the legalization of the Muslim Brotherhood as a party.

Another context that could be influenced was the stress on the societies in question which could be relieved by working for less violence, an improved economy, etc. Related to this was achieving a better performance of the 'failed' establishments, e.g. a stronger state in Lebanon which could provide better security, social services and more equity between sects.

Moreover, political competition on a level playing field could force these movements, in transition to becoming parties, to prove that they could actually deliver. So far, a lack of responsibility had meant that there had been no price to pay for the groups' failure to change unpalatable

policies. Even if their beliefs did not change once they came to power, inability to institute reform might lose them popularity among passive supporters. One example could be taken from Lebanon. Many Shi'as questioned the reason for 'resistance' after the Israeli withdrawal behind the 'Blue line' and also the need for a continued alliance with Syria and Iran. And when Hizbollah had decided to enter elections in the early 1990s, some hardliners demanding an Islamic state split from the movement.

It should also be borne in mind that it was not just outside pressure that forced change but also self-interest and varying intellectual fashions. The Egyptian state's oppression had contributed to changing the Muslim Brotherhood but other factors also played a part such as the need to distance the group from Islamic extremism and evolve according to popular trends. For example, assertions that 'shura' is an Islamic prototype for democracy had been abandoned in favour of a more Western type of democracy including parliamentary pluralism. The Muslim Brotherhood's Supreme Guide, Mehdi Akef, in a recent interview had even accepted that alcohol and banking interest might be allowed.

In discussing policy measures, Mr Rodenbeck agreed that outside pressure was necessary but, as an alternative to the type of external pressure which Dr Norell seemed to advocate, one should rather address such parallel opportunities as might exist to influence these groups. For example, one could explore ways to meet the needs of the passive supporters. Furthermore, the movements should be challenged in debate so as to end the luxury of their idealism in opposition. One example was presented by the - admittedly flawed - Egyptian presidential elections where all the issues debated were practical, not ideological ones. Hamas' leaders had shown an astonishing ignorance about Palestinian finances when they took over government.

It was, however, correct to emphasize the importance of ideology. Dr Norell had noted that the long term goal of creating a pan-Islamic utopia was seldom as questioned as it should be. It was surprising how often the Islamists' assertions to their own constituencies went unchallenged, i.e. that there could be no separation of religion and state in Islam, that there were no 'universal' values, that Israel could not be accepted for religious reasons, etc. It was, Mr Rodenbeck thought,

worth engaging vigorously in the persistent 'meta-debate' referred to in Dr Norell's study, whether God is on the side of the Islamists, or whether history is on the side of liberalism.

Discussion

A number of questions were asked and clarifications made on the scope as well as some details of the study, which was both praised for clarity and criticized for lack of depth and context. It was explained that the study did not purport to be a scientific one and had had limitations both on subject and format due to the terms of reference and the time-constraints imposed. The discussion touched on scope and method, dealt with the role of religion and ideology versus societal influences, and dwelt on the existence, if any, of secular strains in political life in the societies in question. It highlighted the importance of contextualisation and provided some comments on the degree of changeability of the movements under study and methods to approach them and achieve the desired adaptation. As could be expected, no firm conclusions were drawn except that the subject merited further discussion.

Scope of the study

A number of participants questioned, from different angles, the choice of the movements to be scrutinized according to the terms of reference. Even if the three radical Islamist groups discussed in the study – the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas and Hizbollah – were those that currently attracted most attention, including from the perspective of the fight against terrorism, they were hardly representative of all Islamic or even Islamist movements in the Middle East. As stressed by the analyst, they had some ideological tenets in common, but otherwise they diverged so much that one could question how meaningful it was to try to draw common conclusions from a study of them. Already the Sunni-Shia dichotomy represented a point of caution.

The question could also be put whether one should really start a study on ways to deal with a certain phenomenon by addressing the more extreme cases, tainted as they were by terrorism and accordingly subjected to listing by parts of the international community. Were the movements under scrutiny really representative of the political scene in each country? The perspective should be broader, it was argued, and include other political movements as well, including secular ones, if any.

The counter-argument was that it was natural to start reflection where the most acute problems lay.

Ideology

It was unproductive, some thought, to get stuck too much in a discussion of ideology by stressing that as the dominant characteristics. Important and interesting as ideology may be, the picture became confused by the inherent tension between the political ambitions as displayed by representatives of e.g. Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood and the theological roots of these movements. There also existed a deeper contradiction between, on one hand, the accumulated, collective or personal, experience of political activity and, on the other hand, the feeling of being among the few chosen ones living isolated from society. Moreover, sociologically speaking, there was a breaking point where a group became too big - and too influential - to maintain its sense of being an elect élite, perhaps subjected to persecution. Recruitment from new social strata could itself bring ideological change.

On the point on secularism, some questioned whether there could be said to exist any really secular movements in the deeply religious, predominantly Muslim region which the Middle East represents. There was not even a good Arabic word for 'secular'. Others mentioned the decidedly political or secular role which Islamic parties had in fact played in countries like Turkey. Was it even worth-while to try to distinguish between religious/Islamic and secular strands? Moreover, if the latter indeed existed, were they really relevant? That could rightly be asked, some thought, given the bleak performance by traditional as well as new-founded liberal movements in the recent Egyptian elections which could not be fully explained by the régime's harsh measures. One view was that the very appearance of the Islamist movements or parties under discussion was an expression of a sort of secularization of society. People did not just 'live' their religion any more. When religion was being transformed into the ideology of different 'movements' it had already been distanced from popular tradition.

Why did Islamist parties seem to thrive right now? One explanation of their growing support which several speakers mentioned was that they succeeded *faute de mieux*. Maybe it was not so much the attraction of Hamas which had given them victory as the poor performance of Fatah. The 'establishment' in the countries in question had generally failed as a

provider of security and social benefits, as had various nationalist, socialist, Pan-Arabic and other ideologies adhered to in the past by leaders of a relatively secular or, perhaps better, modernist leaning. There was no alternative left but authoritarianism or Islamism. At the same time, it was argued, there were in fact balances. Today, more people than you normally thought showed secular sympathies. This fact was influenced by the perspective of encroachments on the enjoyment of civil and political rights which created fears among many people, including those with deep religious beliefs. In that context, it was recalled that the Muslim Brotherhood was created in Egypt in the late 1920s in parallel with the up-surge of nazism and fascism.

Context

Many were of the view that the development and prospects of the three groups under study varied a lot depending on the geographic, societal and political circumstances in each case. In that sense the movements were the product not only or even predominantly of common ideological tenets, but more so of their respective nations and circumstances – i.e. context. The political setting probably out-weighed basic ideological values as factors in the formation of these movements, according to this opinion. Not even Hamas, which recognized its roots in the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, could be said to represent a blueprint of its parent. Many observers, it was recalled, thought that Hamas had essentially been formed by the Palestinian experience.

The differences resulting from the fact that Hizbollah had sprung from a Shia environment whereas the other two movements were Sunni-based were also underlined. In the Lebanese context, however, the existence of a clan system was probably equally important for Hizbollah as the group's Shia roots.

Common to the three movements, it was remarked, was a regional setting marked by a lack of political sovereignty which could only be overcome by a regional security system. In this connection, it was pointed out, critically, that the narrative of the report hardly mentions one fact of overriding importance, i.e. Israel's occupation of Palestinian (and Syrian) territories. Opposition was also voiced to the assertion reproduced in the report that Israel has no partner for peace. Israel itself had not acted so as to present itself as a serious peace partner. Demands were now being pressed that the movements under study should change

their fundamental tenets. No-one advanced similar demands on the Jewish state, it was observed.

It was also noted that the West tended to regard Hamas solely through the prism of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. However, in recent electoral campaigns, the Palestinians themselves seemed to discuss economic and social issues like poverty, accountability, democracy and human rights, rather than the existential conflict with Israel.

Changeability

Many held the view that the long-term goal of creating an Islamic state was given greater attention in the study than its relevance merited. This led to a discussion of changeability. Not only the Muslim Brotherhood had changed. Hizbollah, it was argued, had left the idea of creating a State of God in Lebanon already in the 1980s. The sectarian mosaic of that country no doubt had been the backdrop of this decision. The author of the report agreed that Hizbollah nowadays hardly believed in the long-term goal of a Divine state, at least not for the foreseeable future. Moreover, it was observed that the last few years of strife between Shi'as and Sunnis in Iraq had also contributed to changes in Hizbollah's beliefs. They had also distanced themselves somewhat from Syria following the murder of Hariri, although Hizbollah's recent boycott of government work merited caution in drawing that conclusion.

Further on changeability, it was recalled that Arafat and Fatah (the PLO) – by no means Islamist in the sense of the report under discussion - had changed considerably over the years. Of relevance to the discussion of the movements now under study was how external and internal pressures had interacted in bringing about that change.

Attention was also drawn to the usefulness of a discussion of the factors conducive to the co-optation of Islamist movements mentioned in the report – the existence of a relatively free political system with reasonably stable institutions, a situation where other actors could balance the movements so as to make them 'play by the rules', and sufficient time for this co-optation to have an impact.

Democratization

It was recalled that criteria similar to those for co-optation were often put up for democratization to take hold in a society. The discussion should be deepened on the extent to which such factors were present in the respective countries. Only the Muslim Brotherhood had had a long history in which to mature, but in Egypt the political system was far from free and healthy. Kifaya was no genuine counterweight, and the system of checks and balances which the régime provided was a very repressive one.

In the Palestinian territories, the political system had become free only lately with the democratic presidential and parliamentary elections being held, but whatever institutions had been created were in the current situation under an imminent risk of being dismantled. The counterbalance, Israel, was external. On the other hand, there existed a strong NGO tradition untypical to the rest of the region.

Lebanon presented a better case according to the criteria set up, in spite of the sectarian constraints. There the political system was free, in a sense, and the institutions existed since long and balanced each other to a certain extent. The system's weakness was glaring, however.

In these hardly favourable conditions, one could rightly ask what the chances were of bringing about a positive, democratic change in the movements under discussion, and what could be done to influence developments in that direction in the respective societies. That should lead to some deeper thought on what tools were the best to further democracy throughout the Middle East region.

It was furthermore observed that a movement like Hizbollah might well constitute a threat to Israel but not necessarily to the West or to democracy. The groups under discussion were indeed anti-liberal, but not by definition un-democratic since they acted in a democratic way.

Policy choices

Many speakers dissociated themselves from both the main options presented by Dr Norell for influencing the radical Islamist movements - the 'hard core' one of isolation and sharp confrontation until fundamental change occurred ('the realist school'), and the 'soft' one of leniency and dialogue bordering on embracement in the hope that this would induce gradual change ('the optimist school'). If the first one

failed, as could be expected, what action remained to be undertaken, it was asked rhetorically. All-out war? Moreover, if the West believed in its professed values of democracy and human rights, it was impossible to totally disregard the popular will as shown in democratic elections.

As for the second option, no-one was really advocating it fully to judge by the international attitudes to Hamas' electoral victory. In this connection it was observed that in their common reactions to Hamas forming the government, the USA and Europe appeared to have different aims. Europe demanded a change in Hamas as a condition to allow it to go ahead with its electoral success, whereas the US demands for change were also a means to bring about failure.

There seemed to be general agreement at the seminar that the policy choice was neither clear-cut nor easy. A combination of applying some pressure, opening a dialogue to convey i.a. tough messages and using other means of engagement, including 'carrots' based on conditionality, seemed to be the most realistic and, for political reasons, readily available option. That was probably also the avenue which promised the best chances of success, although by no means any guarantees.

Concerning dialogue, the observation was made that there was a tendency among Westerners to listen more attentively to those interlocutors whom one could best understand and sympathize with. This made it easy to forget or disregard the Islamists. However, there seemed to be a growing realization in the West of the need to talk not only with supposedly moderate Islamists but with representatives of radical Islamist movements as well. Whether or not they would listen and let themselves be influenced remained an open question. At any rate, if attempts at dialogue were made we should not forget our own values but keep in mind that the unacceptable part of the Islamists' goals must be changed.

Issues for further discussion

It was clear that a number of questions must be discussed further to better understand the situation concerning movements like the ones under scrutiny. Many of these issues were general and would perhaps better be treated elsewhere. One was the whole complex of questions related to political parties and change. There was e.g. the issue what happens when a group or a movement develops into a political party.

And when along that road does such a transformation occur?
(Following the observation that the report did not seem to consider the Muslim Brotherhood to be a party, Dr Norell explained that he had taken a formal view of this given the current Egyptian legislation.)
Another important question was what mandate had in reality been received, when the leaders of a radical political group were elected to office. In other words, what was the relationship between the electoral platform and the fundamental tenets of that movement? That question related to the issue of accountability. Before and after elections, what role did the respective constituencies play in shaping a movement or party? Obviously, some fundamental issues of democracy would be at play in such a discussion.

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