SHADI HAMID

Parting the Veil

Now is no time to give up supporting democracy in the Muslim world. But to do so, the United States must embrace Islamist moderates.

Amerca's post-September 11 project to promote democracy in the Middle East has proven a spectacular failure. Today, Arab autocrats are as emboldened as ever. Egypt, Jordan, Tunisia, and others are backsliding on reform. Opposition forces are being crushed. Three of the most democratic polities in the region, Lebanon, Iraq, and the Palestinian territories, are being torn apart by violence and sectarian conflict.

Not long ago, it seemed an entirely different outcome was in the offing. As recently as late 2005, observers were hailing the "Arab spring," an "autumn for autocrats," and other seasonal formulations. They had cause for such optimism. On January 31, 2005, the world stood in collective awe as Iraqis braved terrorist threats to cast their ballots for the first time. That February, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak announced multi-candidate presidential elections, another first. And that same month, after former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri was

---

SHADI HAMID *is director of research at the Project on Middle East Democracy and an associate of the Truman National Security Project.*

killed, Lebanon erupted in grief and then anger as nearly one million Lebanese took to the streets of their war-torn capital, demanding self-determination. Not long afterward, 50,000 Bahrainis—one-eighth of the country's population—rallied for constitutional reform. The opposition was finally coming alive.

But when the Arab spring really did come, the American response provided ample evidence that while Arabs were ready for democracy, the United States most certainly was not. Looking back, the failure of the Bush Administration's efforts should not have been so surprising. Since the early 1990s, U.S. policymakers have had two dueling and ultimately incompatible objectives in the Middle East: promoting Arab democracy on one hand, and curbing the power and appeal of Islamist groups on the other. In his second inaugural address, President George W. Bush declared that in supporting Arab democracy, our "vital interests and our deepest beliefs" were now one. The reality was more complicated. When Islamist groups throughout the region began making impressive gains at the ballot box, particularly in Egypt and in the Palestinian territories, the Bush Administration stumbled. With Israel's withdrawal from Gaza high on the agenda and a deteriorating situation in Iraq, American priorities began to shift. Friendly dictators once again became an invaluable resource for an administration that found itself increasingly embattled both at home and abroad.

The reason for this divergence in policy revolves around a critical question: What should the United States do when Islamists come to power through free elections? In a region where Islamist parties represent the only viable opposition to secular dictatorships, this is the crux of the matter. In the Middle Eastern context, the question of democracy and the question of political Islam are inseparable. Without a well-defined policy of engagement toward political Islam, the United States will fall victim to the same pitfalls of the past. In many ways, it already has.

The Islamist Dilemma

The "Islamist dilemma" is nothing new. It is the same dilemma that has plagued policymakers since the Algerian debacle of the early 1990s. On December 26, 1991, in that country's first free legislative elections, the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) won 47 percent of the vote and was poised to capture a commanding parliamentary majority. The staunchly secular military, claiming to save democracy from itself, intervened, canceling the elections and provoking a brutal civil war that would rage for more than a decade.

After the election results were annulled, the State Department said that it "viewed with concern the interruption of the electoral process" and expressed "hope [that] a way can be found to resume progress." But the United States

stopped well short of outright criticism, saying instead that the military inter-vention did not actually violate the Algerian constitution. The George H.W. Bush Administration's indifference to what was a blatant breach of the democratic process seemed a far cry from the lofty rhetoric of a "new world order." As one State Department official later remarked, "By not saying or doing anything, the Bush Administration supported the Algerian government by default." Even in hindsight, James Baker, who had been secretary of state at the time, was unre-pentant: "Generally speaking, when you support democracy, you take what democracy gives you…If it gives you a radical Islamic fundamentalist, you're supposed to live with it. We didn't live with it in Algeria because we felt that the radical fundamentalists' views were so adverse to what we believe in and what we support, and to what we understood the national interests of the United States to be."

Such *realpolitik* was not supposed to have a place in the current Bush Admin-istration. In his second inaugural address, the president declared, "All who live in tyranny and hopelessness can know: The United States will not ignore your oppression, or excuse your oppressors. When you stand for your liberty, we will stand with you." Egypt, the second-largest recipient of U.S. foreign aid, was to be the centerpiece of the new "forward strategy for freedom." And for a time, the strategy seemed to bring results. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice can-celed a March 2005 trip to Cairo to protest the imprisonment of Ayman Nour, a leading liberal figure and head of the Ghad Party. Responding in part to U.S. pressure, President Mubarak announced that Egypt would hold multi-candidate presidential elections for the first time. Emboldened by the changing atmosphere, opposition groups began to assert themselves. In late March, the Muslim Broth-erhood, Egypt's largest and most influential opposition group, launched a series of protests calling for greater freedoms and constitutional reform. When the inevitable clash came, thousands of Muslim Brothers were arrested in one of the most extensive government crackdowns on the group in decades.

After the mass arrests, the Bush Administration refused to criticize the Egyp-tian regime, expressing instead "disagreement with many of the things the Mus-lim Brotherhood stands for." The Administration was trapped, torn between unsavory autocrats and unsavory Islamists and not willing to push conclusively in either direction. As a result, it was unable to take the next logical step: for-mulating a coherent policy toward political Islam. Soon after Bush's landmark inaugural address, many in the Arab world were growing confused by the mixed messages. Nor did it help that, in May, First Lady Laura Bush made a spring trip to Egypt, a week before a national referendum on proposed election reforms, which most major parties had decided to boycott. In Cairo, Mrs. Bush, with the

Egyptian president's wife, Suzanne, at her side, called Mubarak's reforms "bold" and "wise." Sensing the lost momentum, Rice was sent to Egypt in June to give a major policy speech at the American University in Cairo. In what seemed a thinly veiled reference to the need to integrate Islamists in the political process, Rice stressed that "the fear of free choices can no longer justify the denial of liberty." Yet in the question-and-answer session, she said that the United States would not engage with the Muslim Brotherhood. Rice then met briefly with members of the Egyptian opposition, most of whom turned out to be "reformists" with close ties to the ruling National Democratic Party.

But the electoral rise of the Islamists would continue. In Egypt's 2005 parliamentary elections, the Brotherhood won 40 percent of the vote and ended up with an unprecedented 88 seats—a more than fivefold increase from its previous total of 17. The first round of the election was conducted in a relatively open atmosphere; however, during the second and third rounds, the ruling party resorted to brute force. Thugs hired by the regime attacked voters, kidnapped election monitors, and blocked entrances to polling stations. 10 people were killed and hundreds injured. More than 1,000 Brotherhood members and supporters were arrested. While the violence was being broadcast on satellite stations throughout the world, State Department spokesman Sean McCormack insisted, "We have not received, at this point, any indication that the Egyptian Government isn't interested in having peaceful, free and fair elections."

The Palestinian territories were the other main point of focus for the Bush Administration, and here again, the United States stumbled. Rice had put her support behind holding legislative elections, but the results were not what the administration had hoped for: Hamas, a State Department–designated terrorist organization, won the elections. If one event marked the final, tragic demise of the freedom agenda, it was this. The shocking outcome illustrated the paradoxes of a strategy that was high on rhetoric but hollow on implementation. By all accounts, the elections were clean, free, and fair. This was democracy, but it was also a democracy in which our enemies had been elected to power.

Accepting an Islamist Future

The fear of Islamist ascendancy, while understandable, is based on a series of fallacies. *American Prospect* writer Spencer Ackerman, for example, argues that "the United States is insane to promote democratic elections in which the victors proclaim eschatological hostility to it." Ackerman and others fall under the illusion that Islamists are a monolith of irrational fanatics. But it is worth remembering that the two Middle Eastern countries which are Islamist-led—Turkey and Iraq—are close American allies. It is of course true that Islamist groups use

fevered anti-American rhetoric, but so too does every other political grouping in today's Middle East, even Western darlings such as Kifaya and Ayman Nour's Ghad Party, both part of the Egyptian opposition movement. Nevertheless, despite their strong opposition to U.S. policy, most mainstream Islamists go out of their way to explain that they have no gripe with America as such. Even their dislike of the U.S. government has its limits. The Brotherhood's leader, General Guide Mahdi Akef, usually known for his inflammatory anti-Western comments, admitted to me in an August 2006 interview that the Bush Administration's pressure on the Mubarak regime had had a positive effect on Egyptian reform.

There is also the oft-repeated claim that free elections will lead to a scenario where Islamists would come to power and then end democracy as we know it ("one person, one vote, one time"). However, this is a purely speculative claim; such a scenario has never actually happened. But some might counter that it *could* happen in the future. Islamist leaders are well aware of the Western fear that their commitment to democracy is not whole-hearted and, in response, point out that they have peacefully played by the rules of the democratic game since at least the 1980s. They recognize that if they did come to power through democratic means and then refused to let go of power, it would cast a permanent shadow on the integrity of Islamic movements throughout the world. Islamist parties would no longer be trusted in the eyes of their own people and their secular opponents would have yet more justification to ruthlessly suppress them. As Khairat al-Shater, the Brotherhood's deputy general guide, wrote in a 2005 *Guardian* op-ed, "The domination of political life by a single political party or group, whether the ruling party, the Muslim Brotherhood or any other, is not desirable: the only result of such a monopoly is the alienation of the majority of the people."

Commitment to democracy aside, most Western analysts and policymakers agree that an entrance into politics must be made conditional on non-violence. But with the exception of Hamas and Hezbollah (which were founded explicitly as militant organizations), the vast majority of mass-based Islamist groups in the Middle East have already renounced violence. Groups such as Jordan's Islamic Action Front (IAF), Morocco's Justice and Development Party (PJD), Tunisia's Al-Nahda, Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP), and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood are not armed, nor do they have military wings.

In the Egyptian context in particular, critics point out that jihadists have often started out as members of the Brotherhood, only to move on to more violent pursuits. But it is precisely because the Brotherhood is committed to gradual rather than revolutionary change that more militant cadres have left to join groups like al-Gamaa al-Islamiyya and Islamic Jihad. In fact, many jihadists consider the

Muslim Brothers *kafirs* (disbelievers) because of their participation in elections and accommodation with the secular nation-state. As Ayman al-Zawahiri, Al Qaeda's second-in-command, said, "What is truly regrettable is the [Brotherhood's] rallying of thousands of duped Muslim youth in voter queues before ballot boxes instead of lining them up to fight in the cause of Allah. They have substituted Allah's bidding with the conditions and regimes of the infidels."

None of this is to say that Islamist groups are ideal allies in the struggle against autocracy, or that they are paragons of liberalism. Their views on women's rights, social policy, and the implementation of *sharia* law leave much to be desired, while their understanding of international affairs and globalization tends to be simplistic and prone to demagogic flourishes. But one does not need to like Islamist parties or what they stand for to support their right to stand in free elections. That said, Islamists have made impressive strides over the years, focusing less on empty religious sloganeering and more on the importance of democratic reform. As early as 1994 and 1995, the Muslim Brotherhood released a series of documents clarifying its position on issues of concern. In the statement "Shura and Party

Instead of assuming that Islamist groups are obstacles to democracy, we should instead ask how they can help it come about.

Pluralism in Muslim Society," the Brotherhood publicly affirms its belief in popular sovereignty, calls for a "balance of powers," and disavows all forms of political violence. Its "Statement on Democracy" addresses the status of non-Muslim minorities: "Our position regarding our Christian brothers in Egypt and the Arab world is explicit, established and known: they have the same rights and duties as we do…Whoever believes or acts otherwise is forsaken by us." More recently, the Brotherhood released its 2004 reform initiative, in which it reiterates in its most clear language to date its commitment to alternation of power, separation of powers, the unrestricted right to form political parties, and freedom of personal belief and opinion.

Jordan's Islamic Action Front has taken similar steps; the group's 2003 electoral program, in particular, provided considerable evidence that it was moving toward an acceptance of the foundational aspects of democratic life. Where there was only one mention of the word "democracy" in its 1993 electoral program (and none in 1989), in 2003 it appeared five times. Moreover, two decidedly Western formulations were used for the first time, *tadowul al-sulta* (alternation of power) and *al sha'ab masdar-al-sultat* (the people are the source of authority). Where there was once a fevered debate in Islamist circles about the legitimacy of

democracy versus the Koranic concept of *shura* (consultation), this is no longer the case; democracy has won. In this respect, Islamist parties may be comparable to socialist and Christian Democratic parties in Europe and Latin America, which entered the political process with extra-democratic impulses that were in time tempered by the logic of open political competition.

In any case, Islamists are here to stay. The United States can no longer delude itself into thinking that it can build non-existent liberal-secular parties from scratch and somehow lead them to electoral victory. Arab liberals are in disarray and in no position to seriously contest elections, much less win them. Only Islamists have the mobilizing capacity and grassroots support to pressure Middle Eastern regimes to democratize. Thus, in not engaging groups like the Muslim Brotherhood, the United States cuts itself off from large constituencies whose participation is vital to the process of political change. Instead of assuming that Islamist groups are obstacles to democracy, we should instead ask how they can help it come about.

Learning to Live with Political Islam

An effective approach to Islamism should consist of five components. First, it would mean stating as a matter of policy that the United States is not opposed to dealing with non-violent Islamist parties and has no problem with Islamists coming to power through free elections, under the condition that they have explicitly committed themselves to democracy and peaceful political participation (Hamas and Hezbollah would not fall under this rubric because they have not renounced violence).

Second, a new policy should entail establishing a U.S.-Islamist "dialogue" to explore areas of tension and misunderstanding. Due to sensitivities with existing regimes, this would require flexibility on the part of the United States, using intermediaries and back channels. Nevertheless, a structured, focused engagement would force Islamists to more clearly explain their positions on contentious issues. As trust develops, there could be a more frank discussion about how moderate Islamists can help us, and vice versa. In the context of the dialogue, policymakers would seek to extract several "concessions" from rising Islamist parties. For example, Islamists in strategically vital countries would have to pledge that they would not suspend or cancel their countries' peace treaties with Israel should they come to power. In return, the United States would exert pressure on Arab regimes to accept Islamist groups as full, equal participants in the political process (a risky move on America's part, given that regimes like the Jordanian monarchy and the Mubarak government are unlikely to approve of U.S. rapprochement with Islamist opposition groups).

Third, the United States should seek to influence internal struggles within Islamist groups in key countries. This means recognizing that there are serious internal divisions between "reformists" and "conservatives." Unfortunately, because of increased polarization after last summer's Israel-Hezbollah war, the ideologues grow stronger; today, for example, "hawks" and "Hamasists" dominate Jordan's IAF, something which was not the case three years ago. Policymakers must find ways to draw the balance of power toward those relative moderates who are more predisposed toward rapprochement with America and coexistence with Israel. The de-polarization of the region can be achieved by, among other steps, apologizing for the Iraq war, emphasizing the war on terror's non-military aspects, and recommitting to hands-on diplomacy in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. These measures would create a reservoir of goodwill and give reform-minded Islamists political cover to move to the center and take positions that may be unpopular with their more conservative supporters.

Fourth, the United States should facilitate cross-ideological cooperation between Islamists and secularists. The more Islamists face real competition, the better. Ideally, Islamist groups would come to power as part of larger coalitions with secular and liberal parties. With this in mind, the United States should make a concerted effort to promote Islamist participation in the context of an official framework—for example a national charter—which would encourage the participation of secular parties. A charter would clearly outline the rules of the game and guarantee freedom of religion, freedom of expression, and equal rights for women and minorities regardless of which party came to power. There is a precedent for such an approach. In 1995, the United States supported the Sant'Egidio talks in Rome in which Algerian parties from across the ideological spectrum agreed on a national platform as the basis of a new political process.

Finally, it is critical to begin building bridges with the next generation of Islamists. This can be done by using educational and cultural exchanges as a mechanism for establishing meaningful linkages between American researchers, policymakers, and businesspeople and their Islamist counterparts. The goal would be to identify Islamist leaders of tomorrow and provide them with a balanced view of American culture and politics.

While these changes are unlikely in the short run to be popular domestically, they are necessary. Islamists will come to power whether we like it or not; in Iraq, Turkey, and the Palestinian territories, they already have, It is better to have links—and leverage—with these groups before they come to power, not afterwards. This leverage will increase our ability to hold Islamists to their democratic commitments, and will be critical in ensuring that vital American interests are protected when "friendly" dictators are finally pushed out of power.

Autocracy is not permanent. It will, sooner or later, give way to an uncertain "something else." The question is whether the United States will position itself on the right side of the coming transformation.

Risks and Benefits

Given current realities, a willingness to engage with moderate Islamist parties is the necessary prerequisite for reviving American support of democracy in the Middle East. Nevertheless, the question remains: Is promoting democracy really worth it when there are so many risks? It is. Not only is supporting Arab democracy the only way for progressives to realign their policies with their long-standing belief that America has a moral responsibility to promote human rights and democracy abroad, it is also a wise strategy for countering the poisonous political environment that has given rise to so many of the region's intractable problems. Democracy would give Arabs a newfound sense of political agency, provide an alternative to the prevailing culture of victimization, grant liberals more political space to communicate their ideas, and focus Arab attention on internal development rather than external problems. Perhaps most importantly, democracy promotion is the only way to effectively combat religious extremism and terrorism. On the most basic level, when people lack peaceful, democratic channels to express their political grievances, they are more likely to resort to violent methods. In an important 2003 study, Princeton University's Alan Krueger and Czech scholar Jitka Maleckova analyzed a vast amount of data on terrorist attacks and concluded, "The only variable that was consistently associated with the number of terrorists was the Freedom House index of political rights and civil liberties. Countries with more freedom were less likely to be the birthplace of international terrorists."

This is not to say that the United States should go back to the unrealistic idealism of the Bush Administration. Bush's soaring rhetoric—with no talk of potential tradeoffs—raised expectations too high. Democracy is most certainly not a panacea: It would be a mistake to exaggerate the extent to which Arab democracy will resolve the region's laundry list of problems. Democracy is a long-term solution. In the short run, Islamist-led democracies are likely to cause a variety of frustrations for the United States. Newly empowered Islamist groups, after being elected, will find themselves under pressure from their conservative base. This may push them to enact measures that Americans will not be comfortable with, such as limits on alcohol consumption, changes in personal status laws, and restrictions on "offensive" speech.

Beyond these domestic issues, the biggest consideration is how the rise of Islamist parties will affect Israel. This is an important concern, particularly as

Israelis find themselves increasingly threatened by a hostile regional atmosphere in general and Iran's nuclear ambitions in particular. Even on this charged issue, Islamists have begun to adapt to reality. For example, in their 2004 reform initiative, the Muslim Brotherhood affirms its "respect of international laws and treaties," which indicates a potential willingness to accept Camp David. Last year, Abdel Menem abul Futouh, a leading Brotherhood moderate and member of the group's guidance bureau, told me he is willing to accept a two-state solution, with "full sovereignty for a Palestinian state and full sovereignty for an Israeli state." Israel, of course, cannot afford the luxury of being so sanguine about Islamist designs. The United States and the international community can mitigate the risks of Islamist overreach by providing clear incentives for Islamist moderation on this and other issues. A potential model for this type of "enmeshing" is Turkey's ruling AKP, an Islamist party which has enacted a series of far-reaching democratic reforms in order to meet requirements to enter the European Union—and which enjoys a working relationship (and military ties) with Israel.

That said, actions invite unintended consequences. Where Arab regimes privilege order, democratic transitions invariably bring some degree of disorder. But the alternative to democracy is more dictatorship. Maintaining Arab strongmen in the name of so-called stability was precisely the strategy that made the Middle East into the powder keg of violence and fanaticism that it is today. As September 11 taught us, the pathologies of the Arab world, if ignored, can easily spill onto our own soil. ◘