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Islamist Parties and Democracy

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THREE KINDS OF MOVEMENTS

Tamara Cofman Wittes

Tamara Cofman Wittes is a senior fellow and director of the Project on Middle East Democracy and Development in the Brookings Institution's Saban Center for Middle East Policy. Her latest book is Freedom's Unsteady March: America's Role in Building Arab Democracy (2008).

Between 1991 and 2001, the world of political Islam became significantly more diverse. Today, the term “Islamist”—used to describe a political perspective centrally informed by a set of religious interpretations and commitments—can be applied to such a wide array of groups as to be almost meaningless. It encompasses everyone from the terrorists who flew planes into the World Trade Center to peacefully elected legislators in Kuwait who have voted in favor of women’s suffrage.

Nonetheless, the prominence of Islamist movements—legal and illegal, violent and peaceful—in the ranks of political oppositions across the Arab world makes the necessity of drawing relevant distinctions obvious. The religious discourse of the Islamists is now unavoidably central to Arab politics. Conventional policy discussions label Islamists either “moderate” or “radical,” generally categorizing them according to two rather loose and unhelpful criteria. The first is violence: Radicals use it and moderates do not. This begs the question of how to classify groups that do not themselves engage in violence but who condone, justify, or even actively support the violence of others. A second, only somewhat more restrictive criterion is whether the groups or individuals in question accept the rules of the democratic electoral game. Popular sovereignty is no small concession for traditional Islamists, many of whom reject democratically elected governments as usurpers of God’s sovereignty. Yet commitment to the procedural rules of democratic elections is not the same as commitment to democratic politics or governance.

Such definitional minimalism is unhelpful in understanding the challenges that Islamist movements really pose to democratic politics in the

Middle East, and only serves to heighten the uncertainty and dangers that policy makers face in deciding whether or how to engage Islamist movements and politicians. Instead, let me propose a three-part typology of Islamist movements and suggest the different policy approaches that are relevant to each type.

The first category—and the easiest to dismiss for the purposes of this discussion—comprises the relatively small but important group of radical, ideologically driven movements that we can call *takfiri*, for their readiness to label other Muslims heretics, apostates, and therefore justifiable targets of violence. Such groups include al-Qaeda, of course, along with its affiliates and allies in Algeria, Iraq, and elsewhere. These groups take no interest in formal politics save for the strict pan-Islamic state that they envision setting up once they have toppled their region's existing governments. They glorify violence as a religious duty and reject democracy as a violation of God's sovereignty. Such violently irreconcilable groups are irrelevant to the question of whether Islamist movements can be successfully integrated into a democratic Arab future. The *takfiris* will endanger that future, just as they endanger the present.

A second category includes "local" or "nationalist" militant Islamist movements such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Palestine, or the Shia militias of Iraq. Such movements combine Islamist ideology with local political demands; unlike the *takfiris*, they seek and benefit from the vocal support of a given local community. Notably, they all exist in weak or failing states (or nonstates, in the case of Hamas). Thinking of Hamas and Hezbollah primarily as Islamist groups is unhelpful. Although they use Islamist rhetoric to justify their violence, it is that violence—and not their Islamism per se—that causes problems for democracy. Such movements could not get away with playing the dual role of militia and political party under a strong state, such as Egypt's. Only regimes with weak legitimacy and a seriously incomplete monopoly on force are compelled to allow such groups to participate in politics with weapons in hand. That groups such as these desire to take part in elections is itself evidence of the extent to which legitimacy conferred by the ballot box is becoming a norm among Arab citizens. But these groups inevitably cast a pall over progress toward democracy, for they can always use bullets to cancel ballots and defy the rule of law, and they seldom want to give up the privileges that the gun brings them.¹

A role in formal politics helps them to hedge their bets should they ever need to put away the gun. But they do not view political processes and institutions as authoritative, and have often shown themselves ready to threaten or even use force when it suits them—witness the recent actions of Hezbollah against the rest of Lebanese society. As long as the region's Lebanons remain too weak to control their Hezbollahs, there is little hope that full democracy or meaningful equality under law can blossom. States that can barely function or make their writs run through-

out their own lands will never be robust candidates for democratic consolidation.

The Real Problem: Whither the Nonviolent Islamists?

In the strong states that one more often finds in the Middle East, however, the forces of political Islam are a different breed from Hamas and Hezbollah. This third and largest category of Islamist movements—the category most relevant to discussions of democratic change in the Arab world—comprises groups that eschew violence (at least locally) and aspire to a political role in their respective countries, without voicing any revolutionary goals. Such groups may operate as legal parties, such as the Islamic Action Front in Jordan and the Party of Justice and Development in Morocco, or they may be excluded from formal political recognition but still engage in the political process, like Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood (MB) or Kuwait’s Islamist “societies.” They all want to transform society and government into something more “Islamic,” but aim to do so “from below”—that is, by persuading citizens to adopt Islamist ideas, demand Islamist policies from government, and behave as more closely observant Muslims.

Does the evident tactical pragmatism of these groups reflect a broader and more enduring pragmatism, or are we simply seeing radicals who have learned to bide their time and wait for opportunity to knock? In trying to answer this, we immediately run into a vexing problem: How do these movements’ claims of political moderation measure up against the essential principles and practices of liberal-democratic politics? What does political moderation mean for these groups, and how do we know whether they are indeed moderating?

Even on the relatively fundamental issue of nonviolence, a thorough assessment is difficult. The formal political track records of these Islamist groups are typically short, and many of them have at times engaged in violence, justified violence, or associated with people who used violence against the state. Some may abjure violence locally but celebrate violent actions against Americans in Iraq, or against Israelis. Others may reject violent actions but still praise those who carry them out as “martyrs.” Any effort to assess a given movement’s democratic commitments must rely first and foremost on improved clarity and specificity on the part of the groups themselves in laying out their core beliefs and justifying their stances and behavior.²

An Islamist group’s attitude toward violence, however, does not fully indicate how likely or unlikely it is to be able to play a constructive role in a democratic political system. We should also examine three other things. The first is the movement’s attitude toward minorities—especially non-Muslims—and women. Often thought of as homogeneous, the Arab world in fact hosts a wide array of ethnic, sectarian, and re-

ligious minorities with long histories in their various locales. Equality under the law for minorities, for women, and indeed for every individual regardless of his or her beliefs or ethnic origin, is a basic tenet of liberal-democratic politics. Yet traditional Islamic jurisprudence does not embrace this notion. Confronting and resolving this apparent contradiction and distinguishing between the Islamic community's view of non-Muslims and the state's view of non-Muslim citizens are major tasks for Islamist movements seeking to assert the sincerity of their democratic credentials.

A second focus of attention in determining a movement's relative moderation is its attitude toward political pluralism. Questions relevant to pluralistic values include: Does the movement's view of politics allow for a pluralist system in which it is one among a number of different tendencies, and without special prerogatives? How willing is a given group to yield power if it loses at the ballot box? How willing are party leaders to forge political coalitions with non-Islamist movements on behalf of common goals? How willing are they to continue their participation in a system that does not regularly reward them with political power? These questions are relevant not only to what an Islamist movement might do if elected to majority status or to high office, but also to the question of how thoroughly it embraces basic elements of democratic politics such as alternation of power, pragmatism, and political compromise.

A third attitudinal question especially relevant to Islamist movements is whether they believe that religious authority should have a veto on the democratic process. In 2007, the MB shocked Egyptians by releasing a draft political platform that called for a higher council of religious scholars to evaluate government decisions according to Islamic law. Although the Brotherhood claimed that this body would be advisory only and would merely realize the Egyptian constitution's claim that Islamic law is the major source of legislation, the proposal drew fierce criticism and led several MB figures to disavow it for fear of losing their democratic bona fides.³ It is worth noting that the MB's decision to clarify its views by releasing such a document itself represents a form of progress—in this case, toward greater transparency.

Moderation: How Much and How Real?

Gauging these three attitudes can help to tell us how positively or negatively Islamist (and other) political movements will be likely to function in a democracy. But how do we do the actual gauging? How do we recognize moderation? Public rhetoric will not tell us much. Many Islamist groups combine fulsome praise of democracy with other words (or deeds) that contradict basic democratic principles such as equality under the law. Indeed, many peaceful Islamist groups appear to thrive on ambiguity regarding their agendas. But if language is often vague

and behavior often contradictory, how does one know whether apparent moderation is real?

Jillian Schwedler argues that any moderation which is meaningful in democratic terms will appear not merely in changed public rhetoric, but in a party's internal debates.⁴ Yet evidence of the content of internal Islamist debates is hard to acquire. The next best approach may be to assess how internally democratic a given movement is, while also considering the degree of overall political freedom found in society at large. Many Islamist movements are internally hierarchical and opaque rather than democratic and transparent. Scholars, journalists, and citizens have little access to information about a movement's internal debates and struggles, while constituents have few points of access by means of which they can influence a movement's direction. If internal democracy is a good indicator of a party's ability to participate in external democracy, then many Islamist movements give cause for serious concern.

Second, no reliable evaluation of Islamist groups' moderation is possible when political freedom is missing. Without the pressure of open competition to make them explain where they stand on crucial issues, Islamists can sit back and act as general vehicles for discontent. Surveys show that backers of Islamist movements in Morocco and Lebanon come from both secular and religious backgrounds and political preferences; their most notable characteristic is their sense of dissatisfaction with the political status quo.⁵ Islamists still benefit from being a relatively untested quantity in Arab politics. Voting for an Islamist party or candidate is the clearest way for an Arab today to cast a protest vote. That Islamists continue to bear the brunt of regime repression, and that their views and platforms remain unchallenged by any other viable movement, only solidifies their reputation as the most authentic opposition.

Islamists benefit organizationally as well as ideologically from the closed nature of Arab regimes. The state cannot shutter all mosques or control all that is said in them; thus they give Islamists a base that secular political activists cannot match. By continuing to deny basic political freedoms, Arab regimes hand Islamists a competitive edge over other opposition forces—and preserve Islamists as a bogeyman. All this makes the current climate in most Arab states rather hazy (for locals as well as outsiders) when it comes to sizing up what the Islamists are all about and how they will sit with democracy. Indeed, the current environment makes it less rather than more likely that Islamists will feel compelled to behave moderately or pragmatically, or will give voice to such moderate or pragmatic attitudes as their members may hold.

In the final analysis, an Islamist movement's commitment to the democratic process cannot be tested until there is a meaningful democratic political process in which it can choose to engage. A movement's vision cannot be properly understood until open public debate forces the movement's leaders to spell out policies beyond a simple slogan such as

“Islam is the solution.” This suggests that the first steps needed to enable an evaluation of Islamist movements are the expansion of public discussion of political issues and the easing of restrictions on political association and the formation of political parties. Not coincidentally, these steps would also improve the overall quality of political life in the Arab world and enhance long-term prospects for democratic change there.

A legitimate and meaningful political process will require ideological movements to make choices that will test their capacity to embrace moderation and compromise in exchange for tangible gains. Over time, this process will sort those who can play a constructive role in a pluralist system from those who cannot. If, however, the Middle Eastern states whose countries currently host peaceful and participatory Islamist movements fail to make progress toward a more open political marketplace out of fear (real or feigned) of an Islamist takeover, the results could, paradoxically, strengthen radical Islamist forces. If a parliamentary system in which nonviolent Islamists participate is seen as window dressing to cover up autocracy rather than as a real opportunity to influence governance, the discontented will go elsewhere. Nonviolent, participatory Islamists will be discredited, while radicals will grow in popularity. Cultivating Islamist movements that embrace democratic participation and pluralism will be an important part of successful democratization in many Arab societies—but the legitimacy of a moderate Islamist political discourse will hinge on the legitimacy of the democratization process overall.

NOTES

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1. Martin Kramer, “Islamists of All Kinds,” remarks at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, D.C., 24 October 2005.

2. Nathan J. Brown, Amr Hamzawy, and Marina Ottaway, “Islamist Movements and the Democratic Process in the Arab World: Exploring the Gray Zones,” *Carnegie Papers* 67, March 2006; Amr Hamzawy, Marina Ottaway, and Nathan J. Brown, “What Islamists Need to Be Clear About: The Case of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood,” *Policy Outlook* 35, February 2007. Both available at www.ceip.org.

3. Mohamed Elmenshawy, “The Muslim Brotherhood Shows Its True Colors,” *Christian Science Monitor*, 12 October 2007, 9.

4. Jillian Schwedler, “Democratization, Inclusion, and the Moderation of Islamist Parties,” *Development* 50 (2007): 60. See also her *Faith in Moderation: Islamist Parties in Jordan and Yemen* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

5. Mark Tessler, “The Origins of Popular Support for Islamist Movements: A Political Economy Analysis,” in John Entelis, ed., *Islam, Democracy, and the State in North Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 93–126. Tessler has 2006 Arab Barometer data supporting the same conclusion; personal communication, June 2007.