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For decades, U.S. policy toward the Middle East has been paralyzed by "the Islamist dilemma"—how can the United States promote democracy in the region without risking bringing Islamists to power? Now, it seems, the United States no longer has a choice. Popular revolutions have swept U.S.-backed authoritarian regimes from power in Tunisia and Egypt and put Libya's on notice. If truly democratic governments form in their wake, they are likely to include significant representation of mainstream Islamist groups. Like it or not, the United States will have to learn to live with political Islam.

Washington tends to question whether Islamists' religious commitments can coexist with respect for democracy, pluralism, and women's rights. But what the United States really fears are the kinds of foreign policies such groups might pursue. Unlike the Middle East's pro-Western autocracies, Islamists have a distinctive, albeit vague, conception of an Arab world that is confident, independent, and willing to project influence beyond its borders.

There is no question that democracy will make the region more unpredictable and some governments there less amenable to U.S. security interests. At their core, however, mainstream Islamist organizations, such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Jordan and al Nahda in Tunisia, have strong pragmatic tendencies. When their survival has required it, they have proved willing to compromise their ideology and make difficult choices.

To guide the new, rapidly evolving Middle East in a favorable direction, the United States should play to these instincts by entering into a strategic dialogue with the region's Islamist groups and parties. Through engagement, the United States can encourage these Islamists to respect key Western interests, including advancing the Arab-Israeli peace process, countering Iran, and combating terrorism. It will be better to develop such ties with opposition groups now, while the United States still has leverage, rather than later, after they are already in power.

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SMART POLITICS

The Middle East's mainstream Islamist movements, most of which are branches or descendants of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, began as single-issue parties, preoccupied with proselytizing and instituting sharia law. Beginning in the 1990s, however, for various reasons in each case, they increasingly focused on democratic reform, publicly committing themselves to the alternation of power, popular sovereignty, and judicial independence. That said, Islamists are not, and will not become, liberals. They remain staunch social conservatives and invariably hold views that most Americans would find distasteful, including that women's rights should be limited and the sexes segregated. Given the chance, they will certainly try to pursue socially conservative legislation.

Yet to the consternation of their own conservative bases, the region's mainstream Islamist groups have also shown considerable flexibility on core ideological concerns. Despite popular support in the Arab world for the implementation of sharia, for example, many Islamist groups, including the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, have gradually stripped their political platforms of explicitly Islamist content. In the past few years, instead of calling for an "Islamic state," for example, the Muslim Brotherhood began calling for a "civil, democratic state with an Islamic reference," suggesting a newfound commitment to the separation of mosque and state (although not of religion and politics). This move seems to have been deliberately aimed, at least in part, at alleviating international fears; with the goal of improving its image, moreover, the group launched an internal initiative in 2005 called Reintroducing the Brotherhood to the West.

When it comes to foreign policy, mainstream Islamists have rhetorically retained much of the Muslim Brotherhood's original Arab nationalism and anti-Israel politics. Today's Egyptian and Libyan Muslim Brotherhoods and Tunisia's al Nahda refuse to recognize Israel's right to exist and call for the liberation of all of historic Palestine. They also view Hamas not as a terrorist group but as a legitimate force of resistance.

Still, Islamist groups did not create the anti-Israel sentiment that exists in Arab societies; they simply reflect and amplify it. In a 2005 Pew Global Attitudes poll, 100 percent of Jordanians polled were found to hold unfavorable views of Jews. In Morocco, home to the Arab world's largest Jewish community, the figure was 88 percent. The Middle East provides such fertile ground for public posturing against Israel that many groups—not only Islamists but also leftists and nationalists—seek to outdo one another in demonstrating their dislike for Israel.

A country's physical proximity to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict informs how aggressive such posturing is. It is no accident that Jordan's Islamic Action Front—the political arm of the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood—is one of the more vehemently anti-Israel Islamist groups in the Arab world, given that a majority of the Jordanian population is of Palestinian origin. Unlike many of its counterparts, the IAF still uses religious language to frame the conflict; in its 2007 electoral platform, the party affirmed that the conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians is "theological and civilizational," and not one of borders or territories,

as many groups now frame it. The IAF's so-called hawks, who tend to be of Palestinian origin, advocate even closer ties with Hamas. In Algeria and Tunisia, by contrast, Palestine ranks much lower as a priority for local Islamists.

FROM SHADOW TO STAGE

Although most Islamist groups share a broadly similar ideology, their expression of it has differed depending on their unique domestic and regional constraints and whether the group happens to be included in government. When a group is not included in government, and the ruling elite is unpopular and generally pro-Western, Islamists are more likely to define themselves in opposition to the government's policies to garner support.

Taking a hard line against Israel, for example, has been an effective way for Islamists in opposition to criticize regimes that they see as beholden to Western interests and antidemocratic. For example, before Jordan's 2007 parliamentary elections, the IAF released a statement arguing that freedoms in Jordan had diminished after Amman signed a peace treaty with Israel in 1994. Their attempt to connect pro-Israel policy with a loss of freedom was convincing, because it happened to be true. In 1989, before the treaty, Jordan had held free elections for the first time in decades, and Islamists and nationalists won a majority of the seats. But with peace with Israel on the horizon in the early 1990s, the king grew increasingly more autocratic, dismissing the parliament and enacting a new electoral law designed to limit Islamists' power at the polls.

As political systems across the Middle East open up, Islamist groups such as the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and al Nahda will likely try to move from the opposition into coalition or unity governments. During the euphoria of the democratic transition, new political parties—perhaps including Salafi groups that are more hard-line than the older Islamist organizations—will proliferate. As the parties compete for votes, the

incentives for Islamists to indulge in anti-American posturing to win the votes of the faithful may be greater.

Once actually in government, however, a new set of constraints and incentives will prevail. Rather than ruling, Islamists will likely be partners in coalition or national unity governments. Indeed, none of the Islamist groups in question even plans to run a full electoral slate; the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, for example, has explicitly stated that it will not seek a parliamentary majority. Islamists will be satisfied with dominating narrower parts of the government. They are likely to try to gain influence in ministries such as health and justice, while avoiding more sensitive portfolios, such as defense and foreign affairs.

Notably, the Middle East's generally secular security establishments have been hesitant in the past to hand over control of defense and foreign affairs to Islamists. Consider, for example, Necmettin Erbakan, the former leader of Turkey's Welfare Party, who was elected prime minister in 1996, making him the first-ever democratically elected Islamist head of government anywhere. Before coming to power, Erbakan had routinely denounced Israel and pledged to revisit existing military arrangements with the Jewish state. Yet once in office and faced with a powerful secular military and judicial establishment, he reversed course. During his one year in office, Erbakan presided over a deepening of relations with Israel and signed military agreements that allowed Israeli pilots to train in Turkish airspace. His government also set up joint naval drills with Israel in the Mediterranean.

Moreover, mainstream Islamist groups are surprisingly sensitive to international opinion. They remember the outcry that followed Islamist electoral victories in Algeria in 1991 and the Palestinian territories in 2006 and know that a great deal is at stake—hundreds of millions of dollars of Western assistance, loans from international financial institutions, and trade and investment. Islamists are well aware that getting tied up in controversial foreign policy efforts would cause the international community to withdraw support from the new democracies, thus undermining the prospects for a successful transition.

That is why, for example, in 2003, although Turkey's staunchly secular Republican People's Party overwhelmingly voted against supporting the U.S.-led war in Iraq, most of the ruling Islamist-leaning Justice and Development Party

voted for it: the Bush administration exerted heavy pressure and offered billions of dollars in aid. And even Hamas—still regarded as the most radical of the mainstream Islamist groups—tempered its policies toward Israel after its 2006 electoral victory, saying it would accept the 1967 borders between Israel and the Palestinian territories.

For similar reasons, even before coming to power, some officials in the Egyptian and Jordanian Muslim Brotherhoods have explicitly stated that they would respect their countries' peace treaties with Israel (although others have threatened to leave the organization if it ever recognizes Israel). Despite the recent alarm, if Islamists join a coalition government in Egypt, moderation will likely prevail, and the country's 1979 Camp David peace agreement with Israel will be accepted, however reluctantly, as a fact of life.

ACCIDENTALLY ALIGNED

Islamist and U.S. interests can come together almost incidentally as well. The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood—brutally repressed by President Hafez al-Assad in the 1980s—has long shared U.S. fears of a powerful Iranian-Syrian-Hezbollah axis. Its opposition to the Syrian regime is well documented; the government made mere membership in the Brotherhood punishable by death. Like the United States, the group has often criticized Iran as a dangerous sectarian regime intent on projecting Shiite influence across the Arab world. Defying public opinion, Syrian Muslim Brotherhood figures even criticized Hezbollah for provoking Israel to attack Lebanon in 2006.

Similarly, the Lebanese Muslim Brotherhood, known as al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya,

has opposed Syria and Hezbollah's role in Lebanon and allied itself with the pro-U.S. March 14 alliance. Elsewhere, mainstream Sunni Islamists, while applauding Iran's support of Palestinian resistance, have been careful to maintain their distance from the Shiite clerical regime, which they see as a deviation from traditional Islamic governance.

This is not to say that the United States has nothing to be concerned about. Democratic governments reflect popular sentiment, and in the Middle East, this sentiment is firmly against Israel and U.S. hegemony in the region. If the Arab-Israeli conflict persists or, worse, war breaks out, Middle Eastern governments—Islamist or not—will come under pressure to take a strong stand in support of Palestinian rights.

In mature and young democracies alike, such pressure can be difficult to resist. The case of Jordan in the early 1990s is worth considering. In 1991, the Muslim Brotherhood, which had won a plurality of the vote in the 1989 elections, gained control of five ministries, including education, health, justice, religious affairs, and social development, as part of a short-lived coalition government. (This marked the first time—and one of the only times—the Brotherhood has held executive power anywhere in the world.) When, in late 1990, the United States began preparing to take military action against Saddam Hussein in response to his invasion of Kuwait, Jordan's parliament condemned the Western aggression and intensified its pressure on King Hussein to oppose the U.S. intervention—which he did, despite the obvious international consequences. For its part, the Muslim Brotherhood—a staunch opponent of Saddam's secular

regime—at first spoke out against the Iraqi aggression and expressed full support for Kuwait. But as Jordanians took to the streets to protest the war, the Brotherhood reversed course, riding the wave of anti-Americanism to even greater popularity.

THE ISLAMIST EXPERIMENT

So what does all of this mean for Tunisia, Egypt, and other countries facing popular upheaval? Like many others, Muslim Brotherhood activists in Egypt's Tahrir Square broke into applause when, on February 1, U.S. President Barack Obama called for a meaningful and immediate transition to genuine democracy in Egypt. Numerous Muslim Brotherhood members even said they wished the Obama administration would more forcefully push for Hosni Mubarak's ouster. Meanwhile, Sobhi Saleh, the only Brotherhood member on the country's newly established constitutional committee, told *The Wall Street Journal* that his organization was "much closer to the Turkish example," suggesting that the Brotherhood would evolve in a more pragmatic, moderate direction.

For their part, the Western media have tended to idealize the revolutions sweeping the Middle East. Tahrir Square was portrayed as a postideological utopia and Egyptians as pro-American liberals in the making. True, Egyptians (and Tunisians and Libyans) have wanted democracy for decades and showed during their revolution a knack for protest, peaceful expression, and self-governance.

But for all the changes of the past months, the United States remains a status quo power in a region undergoing radical change. Arabs across the region have been protesting an authoritarian order that the United States was, in their view, central in propagating. At their core, the revolutions sweeping the Middle East are about dignity and self-determination. For the protesters, dignity will mean playing a more active and independent role in the region. The moment of apparent convergence between Islamists and the United States during the revolutions does not mean that they will—or should—agree on all foreign policy questions in the future.

During the uprisings, the protesters have sensed that U.S. pressure on the autocratic regimes would prove critical to their success. Like any political group, Islamists are more cautious when they are vulnerable. But once Islamist groups solidify their position, they will have less patience for U.S. hectoring on Israel or the peace process. Already, they have started speaking more openly about their regional ambitions. On February 17, Mohammed Badie, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood's "general guide," stated that the revolution "must be a starting point for Egypt to take up its place in the world again, through recognizing the importance of our responsibilities toward our nations and defending them and their legitimate demands." Meanwhile, Hammam Said, the hard-line leader of the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood put it more bluntly: "America must think seriously about changing its policy in the region, for people will no longer remain submissive to its dictates."

It will take a while for the new governments in Tunisia and Egypt to form cogent foreign policies, but Washington should start thinking ahead to mitigate the long-term risks. In the transition phase, the introduction of constitutional and institutional reforms to devolve power

will be critical. Proportional electoral systems that encourage the formation of coalition governments may be better than majoritarian systems because they would make foreign policy formulation a process of negotiation among many parties, necessarily moderating the result. Already, most mainstream Islamists have significant overlapping interests with the United States, such as seeing al Qaeda dismantled, policing terrorism, improving living standards and economic conditions across the Arab world, and consolidating democratic governance.

By initiating regular, substantive dialogue with Islamist groups to work on areas of agreement and discuss key foreign policy concerns, the United States might discover more convergence of interests than it expects. Indeed, one of the few low-level dialogues the United States has had with an Islamist group—that with Morocco's Justice and Development Party—has been successful, leading the party to be relatively restrained in its criticism of the United States. At any rate, the revolutions have made the short-sightedness of current U.S. policy— studiously avoiding formal contacts with the Muslim Brotherhood and like-minded groups—clear. The West knows much less about Egypt's most powerful opposition force than it should, and could.

The United States can take precautions—and it should—but this does not alter an unavoidable reality. Anti-Israel public opinion will remain a feature of Middle Eastern politics until a final and equitable peace treaty is struck. Whether that happens anytime soon will depend in part on Hamas. If Hamas finally joins a national unity government in the Palestinian territories that then negotiates an accommodation with Israel, this will effectively resolve other Islamist groups' Israel problem. Emboldened by the revolutions, however, Hamas is unlikely to be so cooperative.

For decades, Islamists postponed the difficult question of what they would do in power for a simple reason: the prospect of power seemed so remote. But the democratic wave sweeping the region has brought Islamists to the fore. What comes next may be the Arab world's first sustained experiment in Islamist integration. Fortunately, for all their anti-Americanism, mainstream Islamists have a strong pragmatic streak. If they have not already, they will need to come to terms with regional realities. And, for its part, the United States—and the rest of the international community—will need to finally come to terms with Islamists.⊛