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The Rise of Islamist Actors:
Formulating a Strategy for Sustained Engagement

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SUMMARY

After years of reluctance to engage with Islamist groups, the United States has found itself ill-prepared to understand the rise of these now victorious political parties in the wake of the Arab uprisings of 2011.

Formed in the early 20th century, many Islamist movements grew in the 1970s to challenge both authoritarian regimes and leftist opposition groups, and today, new parties are emerging that attempt to blend religious and cultural authenticity with pragmatic political strategies.

In the past, the U.S. refrained from interacting with important Islamist groups to avoid upsetting existing relationships with autocratic allies and for fear that engagement would be misperceived as endorsement of their ideology.

Over the course of the last year, U.S. policy in the Middle East has shifted toward cautious support for democratic transitions, which includes engaging with Islamist political parties, but in an ad- hoc, reactive manner that lacks a coherent strategy.

As the U.S. formulates its longer-term strategy for engagement with Islamist political parties, it should recognize their commonality with other political groups and reach out based on the degree of their political relevance rather than their perceived alignment with U.S. positions.

In the past six months, "Islamist" parties or blocs have won elections in four countries in the Arab world: Tunisia, Egypt, Morocco, and Kuwait. Islamists may also yet emerge as dominant political actors in other countries affected by the popular uprisings in the Arab world, such as Libya, Yemen, and Syria. While these groups are not new, they are taking advantage of new political opportunities to expand their influence and to develop their political strategies, much like Turkish or Indonesian Islamist parties have been doing in the context of democratic competition. In the process, Islamist parties in the Arab world are rapidly evolving and divisions amongst Islamist politicians are being played out in very public ways, leading to the formulation of new political platforms and even the creation of new Islamist parties.

Islamist groups around the world, and particularly those not associated with political violence, have historically been poorly understood by the United States. This is largely because U.S. policymakers have relied on alliances with authoritarian regimes in many countries of the Islamic world, and those regimes have been at political odds with the Islamist groups that served as their principal sources of opposition. These regimes opposed U.S. engagement with their opponents, and American diplomats chose to prioritize their existing relationships with regime leaders.

In the wake of the Arab revolts of 2011, the United States has found itself ill-prepared to understand the rise of Islamist political parties in the context of new political dynamism. Yet as these groups struggle to develop coherent political messages and strategies, it is a critical moment for U.S. policymakers to proactively engage with them—both to understand their internal political dynamics, and to help influence their evolving political preferences. The U.S. should reach out to Islamist actors recognizing their commonality with other political groups, and based on the degree of their political relevance rather than on their perceived alignment with U.S. positions. Dialogue alone, however, will not be enough. The United States must formulate a thoughtful strategy for what engagement with these groups should look like in practice, particularly as it is confronted with divergent political views. Meaningful engagement with Islamist organizations provides the opportunity to support pluralism, strengthen evolving political institutions, and positively impact political processes in Muslim-majority countries.

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THE EVOLVING NATURE OF ISLAMIST GROUPS

Islamist groups are political organizations that use an Islamic narrative, and often Islamic institutions, in support of their political objectives. They are distinct from Islamic religious groups that may have social or religious, but not explicitly political, goals. The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and Pakistan's Jamaat-e-Islami were particularly influential on the spread of Islamist groups in many dominantly Muslim countries, and a number of contemporary Islamist organizations in the Arab world trace their origins to the Muslim Brotherhood.

Though many modern Islamist groups started in the early 20th century, Islamist movements grew in the 1970s to challenge both the authoritarian regimes under which they lived as well as competing leftist opposition groups. In the 1980s and 1990s, Islamist movements experimented with a range of political strategies from violent attacks on the state and civilians to competition in semi-democratic elections (in countries as diverse as Malaysia, Algeria, Jordan, and Pakistan).

While some Islamist groups, like Somalia's al-Shabaab or transnational groups like al-Qaeda, do use political violence to achieve their ends, over the last decade there has been an explosion of Islamist political parties, which have rejected violence and compete in elections in more than twenty countries worldwide.[1] Islamists are participating according to the rules of their political systems more than ever before and have discovered the very real opportunities provided by democratic competition.

The Justice and Development Party (AKP) of Turkey is one example of a party that emerged from an Islamist tradition but has shed an explicitly Islamist identity to capture the political center through democratic elections. In the process, it has reshaped Turkish politics, maintaining control of the government since 2002. The success of the AKP has highlighted the political opportunities that exist for moderate Islamist parties who focus on more universal political values, rather than on a strict adherence to *sharia*—a lesson that has been studied by Islamist parties from North Africa to Asia. As new political opportunities emerge, Islamist parties are often formed that attempt to blend religious and cultural authenticity with pragmatic political strategies.

DOES THE U.S. FACE AN ISLAMIST CHALLENGE?

U.S. policy toward radical Islamist groups has historically focused on counterterrorism efforts, and has been comparatively more straightforward than U.S. policy toward non-violent movements and political parties, which has been inconsistent both across countries and between groups within countries. That inconsistency has arguably been a strength, because it has appropriately tailored policy toward specific contexts, but it has also been a

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1   Countries or territories that have seen Islamist parties/blocs compete in recent elections include Afghanistan, Algeria, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Egypt, Indonesia, Iraq, Iran, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Malaysia, the Maldives, Mauritania, Morocco, Pakistan, Palestine, Tajikistan, Turkey, and Yemen.

weakness, because it has left the U.S. vulnerable to charges of hypocrisy and political discrimination against Islamists. For example, while the U.S. forged a working relationship with Islamist parties in places like Iraq or Indonesia, it often avoided contact with groups like the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood or even Jordan's Islamic Action Front without a clear explanation of why its policy differed between the former groups and the latter.

Most often, the U.S. rejected engagement with many of these Islamist groups primarily to avoid upsetting existing relationships with autocratic allies. For decades, many Arab leaders decried pressure for political reform because of an "Islamist challenge." They claimed that Islamist parties would inevitably take advantage of political openings to gain and then forcefully consolidate power. This was one of the reasons for U.S. policy in places like Egypt and Tunisia prior to the revolts in those countries, and it remains a consideration in places like Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Algeria, and Israel/Palestine. A second reason that the U.S. has appeared inconsistent in its relationship with Islamist groups is that diplomats do not want engagement with Islamists to be perceived as endorsement of their ideology—an ideology that may differ from U.S. preferences on social/cultural norms or support for violence. This remains a concern in engaging some Salafist and Islamist resistance groups today. For example, the U.S. continues to prohibit diplomatic contact with Hamas in Palestine and Hezbollah in Lebanon, which, though they compete in democratic elections, are included on the U.S. State Department List of Foreign Terrorist Organizations. In difficult conflict situations, however, the U.S. has occasionally shown a willingness to meet with even violent and ultra-conservative Islamists, such as the Taliban.

With the ouster of several long-standing U.S. allies as a result of the Arab uprisings, there is increasing concern that the U.S. now faces an Islamist challenge similar to the one feared by Arab autocrats. Indeed, as Islamist parties succeed in elections, emerging governments could prove less than friendly to a number of U.S. interests including human rights, liberal democratic values, long-standing economic relationships, and Israeli security. This new Islamist challenge is also an important opportunity, however, which requires a meaningful shift in U.S. policy toward consistent engagement on a wide range of political concerns with some traditionally marginalized but non-violent Islamist groups.

SHIFTING U.S. POLICY IN THE WAKE OF THE ARAB UPRISINGS

The slow speed with which the U.S. came to terms with uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, and beyond is understandable given the decades of ties with autocratic allies in the Arab world and the large numbers of policy stakeholders embedded in these relationships. The U.S. entered 2011 unprepared to either understand or engage with the range of new political actors that would emerge in the wake of these revolts. Over the course of the last year, however, American policy has shifted toward cautious support for Arab publics and democratic transitions. A new effort to engage with Islamist political parties has been one of the manifestations of this changing policy.

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These changes have occurred primarily because of very new realities on the ground, although the foundation for greater engagement with Islamist actors had been developing within the administration for some time. This shift towards engagement was codified into Secretary Clinton's address to the National Democratic Institute late in 2011. Secretary Clinton asked the question, "How will America respond if and when democracy brings to power people and parties we disagree with?" In response, she recognized the diversity of Islamist actors and also outlined key principles by which these actors might be judged: commitment to democracy, rejection of violence, respect for freedom of speech, and respect for women and minorities. A key conclusion was that Islamist parties like Tunisia's al-Nahda fit these criteria sufficiently that the U.S. "will work with them." [2] The Secretary has subsequently articulated a belief that Islamist politics can be compatible with democracy and affirmed support for a full democratic transition in Egypt, even if it means a government led by members of the Muslim Brotherhood, whose positions tends to be less consistent and more conservative than Tunisia's al-Nahda. The shift in U.S. rhetoric has also been met with regular high-level meetings between U.S. policymakers and officials from Islamist parties throughout the region.

These signals have led some to conclude that the U.S. is willing to "support" Islamist political parties, and indeed the U.S. has shifted in the direction of engagement, particularly when an Islamist party shows reasonable alignment with stated U.S. policy values.[3] While this is a practical step in the right direction, it fails to fully recognize the new opportunities that engagement with a broad range of Islamist actors—even those with anti-Western views—can provide to the United States. Just as the U.S. misunderstands many Islamist groups, Islamist groups usually have a poor understanding of U.S. interests and behavior. Now, as these Islamist parties begin to formulate foreign policy in their respective countries, their misconceptions about the U.S. could have negative implications for longstanding bilateral relationships. Therefore, one of the most important benefits of consistent engagement on a wide range of issues is the opportunity to clarify American values and priorities that Islamist groups often fail to sufficiently grasp.

It is not clear that all Islamist groups will want to engage the U.S., as they are subject to their own internal political battles. However, now more than ever, American policymakers and diplomats should be open to consistent dialogue with Islamist groups that have previously been ignored. U.S. policymakers should not enter these discussions naïve to the differences between their own values and interests and those of Islamist groups, but rather with an appreciation that meaningful political engagement is one important tool for managing political risk in dynamic environments and for promoting dialogue around American values. In addition, the U.S. should enhance its focus on enabling institutional environments that allow for a diversity of opinions and also strengthen the rule of law.

2   Clinton, Hillary Rodham. "Keynote Address at the National Democratic Institute's 2011 Democracy Awards Dinner," Washington, D.C., 7 November 2011.
3   Danin, Robert M. "Did Clinton Just Announce U.S. Support for Islamist Political Parties?" *The Atlantic*, November 2011.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- *Recognize the similarities between Islamist groups and other political groups, including the way they respond to the political incentives of their systems.* Islamist groups look increasingly like other political groups the longer they engage in the political processes within their regimes. Considerable research has shown that often Islamists will "moderate" their ideology and behavior the more they directly participate in their political systems. Despite their religious character, the priority they place on political goals leads to the same kind of political behavior as other groups that operate under the same political incentives. Singling them out for distinct treatment is not practically useful, and they should be treated along the same lines as other political groups.

- *Proactively engage with a wide range of Islamist organizations, particularly those that have committed themselves to competing in electoral processes.* Islamist groups vary widely in their ideology, but most groups are intrigued by the possibility of developing a relationship with the United States. Diplomatic engagement promotes understanding of political preferences and strategies, and is critical to effective risk management. Engagement includes discussion of political preferences and the promotion of cultural and professional dialogue, with the potential for collaboration on activities of mutual interest. Under normal circumstances (outside of war), engagement should focus on groups who have already committed themselves to political dialogue and electoral processes where they exist and have explicitly rejected violence.

- *Distinguish the appropriate level of political engagement based on the political relevance of the Islamic group, not on the basis of its religious ideology.* Political engagement should never be seen as supporting or condoning the ideology of an Islamist group, and this should be made explicit as the U.S. engages with these groups. Some groups will reject dialogue with the U.S. because of their ideology, but this decision should be theirs, not ours. By using political relevance as a criterion for engagement, diplomats will be better positioned to perceive political shifts, manage risk, and positively influence political outcomes. This requires more diplomatic attention on large, poorly understood political blocs like Egypt's Salafist al-Nour party, than on smaller groups like Egypt's moderate al-Wasat party, whose policy positions may be closer to those of the U.S.

- *Support political pluralism and equal treatment, without distinction for religion or gender.* Engagement with Islamist groups does not in any way compromise the United States' ability to support political and social values—rather, it enhances it. Islamist groups have a record of preferencing Muslim interests over those of other religions— behavior that may be perceived as a threat to minorities and invite human rights violations or conflict. Active engagement provides opportunities to support religious pluralism and individual rights at key moments in the political and social transition of these groups. As Islamist groups negotiate or renegotiate their own policies on sensitive issues like the status of religious minorities,

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individual freedom of worship, and women's rights, the U.S. can share legal models and frameworks from the American experience as well as demonstrate support for international norms.

• *Promote an independent media and freedom of speech.* Islamist groups represent a vision for society that is not universally shared by the publics in which they operate. Conservative Islamists in Tunisia, for example, recently attacked a television station because of its choice to broadcast a controversial film. Open discussion of political and cultural preferences is critical to support pluralism and the competition of ideas over time. An independent media is necessary to facilitate this discussion and can serve to check abuses of power. Islamist actors with control over media regulations should be pushed to maintain or increase the freedom of independent voices within society.

• *Work to strengthen legal systems that provide equal access regardless of religious ideology.* A perceived lack of order and security strengthens support for Islamic law, which may not benefit all populations equally. By supporting independent legal systems, a wide range of preferences can be accommodated and political groups will face meaningful checks on their authority. This does not mean that the U.S. should automatically oppose legal systems that integrate Islamic law, but that the legal preferences of all communities should be accommodated to the extent possible. The strengthening of independent judicial institutions in Arab countries undergoing political transitions will be crucial in the months ahead.

• *Publicly reinforce U.S. support for democracy and good governance in countries where Islamist parties operate.* Despite several prominent recent addresses by top officials regarding American intentions in the Middle East and beyond, the United States is often viewed as hostile to democratic aspirations in Muslim-majority countries. While the U.S. does balance a range of competing interests, its stated commitment to high quality, democratic governance remains unheard by many, including by many Islamist groups inclined to imagine the worst in American intentions. Active, consistent public diplomacy at the highest levels is particularly critical now in order to reinforce accurate perceptions of U.S. interests and reduce the likelihood of Islamist missteps based on poor information.

• *Work together with Islamist groups to support freedom of association.* The Obama administration has consistently stated that civil society is an important pillar of a robust democracy. Islamist groups should also have a vested interest in supporting freedom of association since they were denied such rights under former regimes. Now as NGOs come under increasing attack in some Arab countries, cooperation between the U.S. and Islamist groups in this area would send a strong signal that these are universal rights supported by a variety of disparate actors.