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ISLAMIST MOVEMENTS AND THE DEMOCRATIC PROCESS IN THE ARAB WORLD: Exploring the Gray Zones

Herbert-Quandt-Stiftung

The Foundation of ALTANA AG

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The **HERBERT-QUANDT-STIFTUNG,** the foundation of **ALTANA AG** is a German nonprofit organization that promotes national and international dialogue on political, social, and economic issues of our time.

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FOREWORD

During the last decade, Islamist movements have established themselves as major political players in the Middle East. Together with the governments, Islamist movements, moderate as well as radical, will determine how the politics of the region unfold in the foreseeable future. They have shown the ability not only to craft messages with widespread popular appeal but also, and most importantly, to create organizations with genuine social bases and develop coherent political strategies. Other parties, by and large, have failed on all accounts.

The public in the West and, in particular, the United States, has only become aware of the importance of Islamist movements after dramatic events, such as the revolution in Iran and the assassination of President Anwar al-Sadat in Egypt. Attention has been far more sustained since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. As a result, Islamist movements are widely regarded as dangerous and hostile. While such a characterization is accurate regarding organizations at the radical end of the Islamist spectrum, which are dangerous because of their willingness to resort to indiscriminate violence in pursuing their goals, it is not an accurate characterization of the many groups that have renounced or avoided violence. Because terrorist organizations pose an immediate threat, however, policy makers in all countries have paid disproportionate attention to the violent organizations.

It is the mainstream Islamist organizations, not the radical ones, that will have the greatest impact on the future political evolution of the Middle East. The radicals' grandiose goals of re-establishing a caliphate uniting the entire Arab world, or even of imposing on individual Arab countries laws and social customs inspired by a fundamentalist interpretation of Islam are simply too far removed from today's reality to be realized. This does not mean that terrorist groups are not dangerous—they could cause great loss of life even in the pursuit of impossible goals—but that they are unlikely to change the face of the Middle East.

Mainstream Islamist organizations are generally a different matter. They already have had a powerful impact on social customs in many countries, halting and reversing secularist trends and changing the way many Arabs dress and behave. And their immediate political goal, to become a powerful force by participating in the normal politics of their country, is not an impossible one. It is already being realized in countries such as Morocco, Jordan, and even Egypt, which still bans all Islamist political organizations but now has eighty-eight Muslim Brothers in the Parliament. Politics, not violence, is what gives mainstream Islamists their influence.

Mainstream Islamist movements, for the purpose of this paper, are those that have eschewed or formally renounced violence and are pursuing their goals through peaceful political activity. This is a minimalist definition, and it makes no assumptions about what such Islamists truly believe. It does

not assume that these movements are genuinely committed to democracy, that they have given up on the goal of making the *sharia*, or Islamic law, the basis for all laws, or that they truly accept equal rights for women. We have deliberately chosen this minimalist definition as the starting point of a project that seeks to clarify the beliefs, ultimate goals, and strategies of these nonviolent movements.

Among the Arab Islamist organizations committed to peaceful activity, the following parties and movements deserve our attention: Morocco's *Parti de la Justice et du Developpement* (PJD), Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood and Al-Wasat (Center) Party, Yemen's Islah (Reform) Party, Jordan's Islamic Action Front, Kuwait's Islamic Constitutional Movement, and Bahrain's al-Wefaq [Concordance] Society. Other Islamist parties that have run in elections—the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, the Al-Da`wa and Iraqi Islamic Parties, Hizbullah in Lebanon, and Hamas in Palestine—show strong evidence of involvement in the debates and trends discussed here but are not included extensively in this analysis because they lack one or both of the attributes of eschewing violence and participating in an established political system.

The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace of Washington, D.C., and the Istituto Affari Internazionali of Rome (IAI), Italy, in partnership with the Herbert-Quandt-Stiftung, the foundation of ALTANA AG in Germany and with the support of the German Marshall Fund of the United States and the Arab-Italian Chamber of Commerce, held a meeting in Rome in November 2005 with representatives of mainstream Islamists groups from Arab countries. Two days of discussion between analysts from the three Western organizations and regional activists revealed the Islamists' continuing ambiguity about a number of crucial issues regarding democracy and human rights. We refer to these issue areas about which the thinking of Islamist groups is unclear as "gray zones." This paper does not purport to be a summary of the discussions that took place during the Rome meeting; rather, it represents the authors' own assessment of the gray areas those discussions revealed. It also draws on other conversations with mainstream Islamists by members of the Carnegie team as well as on the writing by a variety of groups and individuals. We focus on six gray zones: Islamic law, violence, pluralism, civil and political rights, women's rights, and religious minorities.

The existence of such gray zones could be construed as the result of duplicity, a deliberate refusal by mainstream Islamist movements to declare what they really think about key sensitive issues in order not to alarm the West and lose their reputation as moderates. But the existence of gray zones can also be explained by the ongoing development in the thinking and strategies of Islamists as well as ongoing contests within each group over the proper direction for their movement. Mainstream Islamist movements may be less than candid about their goals, but analysts who have followed these issues closely over the years, have read their writings, and had earlier conversations with Islamist groups, have no doubt that there has been a real evolution in their thinking.

 The Rome meeting and this analysis of it are seen by Carnegie, IAI and the Herbert-Quandt-Siftung as the beginning of a process to understand the position of mainstream Islamists. Because mainstream Islamist organizations are so important politically, it is crucial to understand the positions they take as well as to follow closely the evolution in the thinking of the various groups.

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THE RISE AND EVOLUTION OF ISLAMIST MOVEMENTS

In today's Arab world, Islamists have assumed the role once played by national liberation movements and leftist parties. They are the mass movements of the twenty-first century. They are well embedded in the social fabric, understand the importance of good organization, and are thus able to mobilize considerable constituencies. Their ideology prescribes a simple solution to the persistent crises of contemporary Arab societies—a return to the fundamentals, or true spirit, of Islam. Indeed, "Islam is the solution" has been the longtime slogan of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood. Like all successful movements, Islamists have been able to distill a long, complex philosophical tradition into simple slogans that have quickly supplanted the Pan-Arabism and socialism that dominated the region until the 1970s. As a result, in most countries Islamists represent the only viable opposition forces to existing undemocratic regimes.

The rise of Islamist movements has become a matter of great concern for secular Arabs and Western governments, who are suspicious of their ultimate goals, and for Arab governments fearful of the growing power of any movement they have trouble controlling. Mainstream Islamist movements discussed in this paper—the so-called moderate movements—have all renounced violence and chosen to advance their goals through political means. As a result, they have become ardent advocates of democracy because they cannot be successful politically in a closed, authoritarian political system. In some countries, their embrace of nonviolence and democracy is a recent development; fears persist that the change is purely the result of expediency and that these movements would revert to their true, radical nature if they gained power.

Some of the movements have deep historical roots dating back to the beginnings of the twentieth century. The first organization, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, was established in 1928. In the 1950s and 1960s, similar movements began in other countries. By the late 1970s, they were clearly important political players in many different Arab states. At that time, they pursued the twin objectives of establishing an Islamic state and immediately implementing the *sharia*. But these goals proved unattainable and gradually gave way to more moderate goals and a more pragmatic view of politics. The reality of regime repression led to a split among Islamist movements. The minority turned to terrorism, at home and abroad. The majority renounced violence and focused on creating grassroots networks to organize popular support. Democracy and human rights, which Islamists used to eye suspiciously as Western ideas inapplicable to Arab societies, found their way into the rhetoric of mainstream Islamist organizations and, most importantly, in their political strategies. Political participation, especially in elections, became a priority for Islamist movements. In countries that allowed the formation of legal Islamic parties (Morocco and Jordan), such parties established a strong presence in the parliaments. In many countries that continued to ban the legal participation of Islamist organization (Egypt), or even forced them into exile (Tunisia, Syria), Islamist opposition movements also emerged as strong voices advocating democracy and political participation.

The Islamist opposition movements to which we have referred so far, and on which this paper focuses, constitute only one category of nonviolent Islamic organizations playing a political role in many Arab countries today. The other categories comprise what can be called the Islamic establishment of many countries; that is, the complex of Islamic organizations, clerics, and institutions close to the government. An Islamic religious establishment exists in most countries, but it is particularly important in Saudi Arabia and Egypt. The Wahhabi establishment in Saudi Arabia is an integral part of the power structure, and the royal family has ceded it control over most

social and educational issues, to the point where it is virtually impossible in the country for a child to attend a nonreligious school or for a woman to enjoy even a minimum level of personal freedom away from the tutelage of the family. The religious establishment in Egypt is equally powerful. The official religious institutions of Egypt, centering around Al-Azhar University, have expanded their influence in the last decade, exercise censorship on publications, and have contributed to making Egypt a socially more conservative society than it had been for a long time. No matter how powerful, however, the official Islamic institutions of Arab countries have so far not been a source of political change. Rather, they have been content to leave the political sphere to the government, extending their influence on the social sphere instead. The rise of moderate, nonviolent Islamist movements seeking a role in the political sphere while also extending their influence on the social sphere is thus a challenge to both governments and Islamic establishments, although there are some indications that religious establishments and Islamist parties are beginning to draw closer in some countries.

THE PERSISTENCE OF AMBIGUITY

Regional and international developments after September 11, 2001, have helped consolidate liberal trends in the Islamist spectrum, both because the movements themselves are not immune to the new discourse about democracy permeating the Arab world and because most authoritarian governments in the region have felt pressure to introduce a modicum of reforms, thus creating greater opportunities for political participation.

Nevertheless, even the most moderate Islamist organizations have not turned their back completely to their ideological beginnings. Within all organizations there remain tensions between the old goals of creating Islamic states and enacting uncompromising versions of the *sharia* and the new goal of becoming influential players in a pluralistic, democratic system. The outcome of these tensions is a great deal of ambiguity on a number of issues—the gray zones. This ambiguity is manifested both in the rhetorical statements of Islamist organizations and in their political actions. The platforms of legal Islamist parties in Morocco and Jordan, for example, accept political pluralism, but only within the framework of an ill-defined Islamic *marji`iyya* (framework or reference). The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood calls for full-fledged democratic reforms but remains reluctant to endorse equal rights for Copts, Egypt's native Christian minority. Kuwaiti Islamists have been active in the parliament since the 1980s, but the majority worked for many years to block women's right to vote based on their interpretation of the *sharia*. The existence of numerous gray zones creates legitimate doubts whether Islamist movements might be advocating democracy for purely instrumental reasons—as a means to gain power in order to create an authoritarian Islamist state. It also provides incumbent regimes that do not want reform with a ready-made excuse to ban the political participation by Islamist organizations, which are their most powerful opponents.

THE CAUSES OF AMBIGUITY

The persistence of gray zones in the thinking and policies of Islamist movements cannot be dismissed simply as a temporary consequence of the rapid but still incomplete change these movements have been experiencing. Rather, the ambiguity has deeper, more complex roots, including the dual

character of these movements as political and religious organizations, the rise of a new generation of activists, and the contradictions of the broader sociopolitical context of the countries where they operate. As a result, there is no guarantee that time will automatically lead to the elimination of the gray zones and that nonviolent Islamic organizations will continue to evolve in a liberal direction. Rather, the outcome is still uncertain, and it will be determined by how the political situation evolves in each country.

Islamist movements are not simply political actors; they are also religious organizations committed to spreading a body of beliefs and practices. This is particularly true for those movements that are not allowed to form legal political parties and are thus forced to pursue their political role and their religious mission under the same organizational umbrella. As political organizations, Islamist movements face an imperative to be flexible and pragmatic. As religious organizations, however, they are more inclined to use the dogmatic, absolutist language of the preacher and to focus on moral issues of good and evil that do not lend themselves to nuance and democratic bargaining. Responding to the religious imperative, Islamist parliamentarians devote much attention to issues such as separation between the sexes in public spaces or conformity of arts and literature with Islam, sometimes neglecting urgent political and socioeconomic matters. Inevitably, this focus strengthens the reputation of Islamist movements as conservative, even retrograde, forces trapped in illiberal stances regarding women and freedom of expression.

Movements that combine missionary and political activities in one institutional structure take particularly ambiguous stances for fear of undermining their credibility with either their religious followers or their political constituents. Conscious of the danger of pursuing two conflicting agendas simultaneously, the Moroccan PJD and the Jordanian Islamic Action Front became purely political organizations, leaving religious activities to the Moroccan Reform and Renewal Movement and the Muslim Brotherhood in Morocco and Jordan respectively. The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt cannot move in a similar direction because the Mubarak regime has made it amply clear that no Islamic party will be allowed to register. In fact, the moderately Islamist and purely political Al-Wasat Party has been denied the right to register several times already. The Brotherhood therefore excludes non-Muslims from its ranks and maintains an overall purely religious structure. Its head is not simply a president or chairman; he is, rather, *al-murshid al-ʿamm* (general guide), and members of the Brotherhood vie with each other in public to ritually kiss his hand.

Islamist movements harbor different generations of activists, who turned to political activities in different periods and under strikingly different circumstances. Older activists entered politics under conditions of open and even brutal repression. In Egypt, the older generation of Muslim Brothers experienced both the repression of the Nasser regime and the mass arrests that followed President Anwar Sadat's assassination in 1981. The older generation of Islamist activists in Algeria, Tunisia, and Syria was forced into exile. Not surprisingly, members of this generation tend to be skeptical about the prospects of their movements' participation in open, legal political activity. Years or even decades of underground activities and constant regime repression have engendered among them a secretive and suspicious mentality, the mirror image of that of the security forces, the *mukhabarat,* that have been hunting them down. Younger activists grew up politically in a climate that, while by no means free and democratic, afforded them somewhat more political space. As a result, they are more daring in weighing potential strategies and far more eager to play politics by participating in elections. Furthermore, younger activists, understandably resentful of the continuing top-down authoritarian control exercised by their elders within the organizations, have come to favor more

participatory internal decision making and, by extension, more participatory politics in general. Some movements have been paralyzed at times by intergenerational tensions, or even split as a result. Both the Egyptian Wasat Party and the Kuwaiti Islamic Constitutional Movement came into being when younger, more liberal activists walked away from rigid organizations that they could not reform. The ideological tensions within some movements are a consequence of these generational power struggles.

The social context also encourages ambiguity. The last three decades have witnessed a conservative turn in many Arab societies, often referred to as the "Islamic Awakening." Islamist organizations have been both cause and consequence of this Islamic awakening, which was often encouraged by governments seeking to combat the appeal of leftists' ideas and by religious establishments eager to increase their influence over society. Since the 1970s, the ideas of religious purity and moral politics—in contrast to the corruption of existing regimes—have been part of this awakening. Slogans such as "Islam is the Solution" and "The Quran is our Constitution" have proven effective in mobilizing broad segments of Arab populations. This leaves Islamist organizations in a quandary. To be effective political players, they need to be flexible and pragmatic, as argued by proponents of the liberal trend. But pragmatism can alienate core constituencies that respond to the message of purity and morality. Ambiguity offers these movements a way out of the dilemma.

The persistence of the gray zones is also a reflection of problems that exist in the broader political context. Opposition forces in authoritarian or semiauthoritarian countries have little incentive to take clear-cut positions that could incur the government's ire. Maintaining ambiguous positions is a defense mechanism used by both Islamist and non-Islamist opposition forces. Furthermore, organizations that are not allowed to participate in the normal politics of their countries have no incentive to continue evolving to adapt to changing circumstances. Tunisian and Algerian Islamists have hardly developed their rhetoric and strategies since the early 1990s. Their ambivalences regarding issues such as pluralism (Tunisian Nahda Party) and renouncing violence (Algerian FIS) are by far greater than in other movements. Frozen in exile, they have degenerated into isolated debating circles and are beginning to lose sight of the changing realities of their societies.

THE GRAY ZONES

In discussions with skeptical liberals probing their commitment to democracy and human rights, mainstream Islamist movements often assert that the differences between their ideas and those of their interlocutors are minor, hinging at most on a few points. But these few points, the gray zones where the thinking of Islamists is ambiguous, are crucial; depending on how the ambiguities are resolved, Islamists could emerge as supporters of liberal democracy or advocates of theocracy.

Islamic Law

All Islamist movements call for the "application of the Islamic sharia." Indeed, it would be difficult to qualify a movement as Islamist if its platform did not include the implementation of the sharia. Despite this emphasis on the sharia, Islamist movements still have much maneuvering room because Islamic law is not a single, well-defined legal code contained between the two covers of a book, but a complex body of rules and interpretations that spans many centuries and follows different schools.

Furthermore, the sharia is unlikely to ever be the only source of law in the Middle East. All Arab legal systems borrow heavily from non-Muslim sources for most of their laws, and their courts are generally structured on European civil-law models. Attempting to build a legal system drawn completely, or even primarily, from traditional Islamic models would be an extremely dramatic change; indeed, according to many historians and legal scholars, such a system may never have fully existed. But few Islamist movements have staked such an ambitious position. The idea of the "application of the Islamic sharia" is perhaps the most significant gray zone in the thinking of Islamist movements.

There is little disagreement over constitutional provisions that declare Islam the state religion. Debates on whether the constitution should declare Islam to be a source of legislation or even "the chief source" of legislation can be fierce but, thus far, it does not seem to make much difference how the issue is solved. Most Arab constitutions include provisions declaring some official role for the *sharia* without a significant impact on the content of the law.

The demand of Islamist organizations, including the official Islamic establishment, that all law codes be reviewed to bring them in line with Islamic legal provisions creates a great deal of concern among non-Islamists, but such calls have not had much impact, either. Committees to Islamicize the legal order have been formed in some countries, such as Egypt and Kuwait. The formation of such committees often represents a rare point of government-Islamist collaboration, but in most countries their work has been so slow and governments so dilatory in acting on their recommendations that almost no change has taken place. Following a pattern all countries would recognize, the creation of a committee has simply served to bury the issue and defer conflict, rather than to resolve it.

Debates about so-called "laws with beards"—laws specifically addressing Islamists' concerns—vary surprisingly from country to country. What may seem essential to Islamists in one society may seem of secondary importance in another. For instance, sale of alcohol is legal in some countries, sharply restricted in others, and banned completely in yet others. In earlier generations, there were often some arguments regarding alcohol, and there is no doubt that most Islamists find its presence noxious. Yet alcohol-related legislation has rarely emerged as a priority issue for mainstream movements in the legislative arena in recent years. Criminal penalties, though often taken to be symptomatic of a perceived harshness in Islamic law, are only very rarely major issues for public debates. While no Islamist movement can repudiate Islamic criminal law, in most countries the mainstream actors simply do not press the matter.

The issue of who has the right to legislate, and under whose authority, is perhaps a most fundamental point of divergence between Islamists and non-Islamists. In a truly strict interpretation of what implementing the *sharia* means, enacting laws is not to be the prerogative of freely elected parliaments deriving their authority from the voters, but that of jurisprudents interpreting the word of God—a position which is of course anathema to non-Islamists. Islamic jurists have, of course, generally recognized that governing always involves making policy for areas that, as some current Islamists phrase it, are "beneath the dignity" of the *sharia*. Yet while rulers are thus allowed to issue some law-like regulations, these must not be accorded the same status—nor can they violate—the provisions of the *sharia*.

In practice, some Islamist movements, such as those in Morocco and Egypt, have recently cast their call for Islamic law in more flexible—though quite vague—terms; they are willing to

accept that law is to be legislated through the normal parliamentary process but argue that Islamic authorities must be consulted and that the law should draw in part from an Islamic *marji`iya* (frame of reference or authority). Movements taking this position do not insist that law draws exclusively on Islamic sources but only argue that such sources, where available, should be incorporated into the debate. This formulation is perhaps the friendliest one to democratic politics since it does not require that any particular standard be met and allows democratic bargaining over the content of legislation, insisting only that Islamist movements be invited to join the bargaining process. This is not a view unanimously shared by all mainstream Islamists.

It is important to underline here that the issue of implementing *sharia* is so fundamental to Middle East culture that even opponents of Islamist movements rarely dare to directly criticize the call to apply Islamic law; secularism is not a stance likely to attract much political support in the region. Instead, representatives of non-Islamist movements advocate "new thinking" or more modern interpretations of Islamic law, often calling for a revival of *ijtihad,* meaning the independent reasoning by religious scholars or by Muslims generally. The revival of *ijtihad*, they argue, is particularly urgent because of the number of new issues that arise today that cannot easily be addressed by older rulings. In turn, Islamist leaders who want to appear moderate and reasonable often claim that their own interpretations are not rigid and boast about the "new thinking" characterizing their approaches to law. Such general discussions by Islamists and non-Islamists alike do very little to clarify the issues. Islamist movements have never closed the door of *ijtihad*. On the contrary, since they first arose in the first half of the twentieth century they have used it freely to justify their positions. More broadly, Muslims have been awash in new thinking for several generations. The issue is not whether new interpretations are permissible but who may develop them, how they may be derived, and how far they can go. All these issues fall into a vast gray area of fundamental importance.

The Use of Violence

Most governments in the Arab world balk at treating Islamist movements as legitimate political actors, accusing them of harboring violent and revolutionary tendencies. The claim by moderate Islamists that they are committed to nonviolent change is often dismissed by incumbent regimes and secular opposition forces as a tactical maneuver; Islamists, it is often claimed, want to take advantage of any democratic mechanism available in order to win power, but they are ready to turn to violence if democracy does not deliver what they want.

On one level, this charge is unfair. Most of the region's electorally oriented major Islamist movements have never been involved in violent political activities or have repudiated them if they were. And, as they are quick to point out, Islamists are far more likely to be victims rather than perpetrators of political violence, with regimes like Egypt's and Tunisia's unleashing their tough security forces against even moderate Islamist opponents. Secular opposition movements have generally been timid in denouncing violent and repressive measures against Islamists. In this sense, it is the large Islamic movements that would seem to need protection from state violence, not the state that needs protection from the Islamists. There are, to be sure, Islamist movements that retain armed wings for use in a domestic context. While these movements are excluded from this analysis, it should be noted that some of them (most notably Hamas and Hizbullah) claim to retain this capacity for use externally rather than internally, an issue that will be addressed below.

On a different level, however, fears that the growing success of Islamist movements may lead to violence have some justification. Incumbent governments and non-Islamist opposition movements fear not only the intentions of the mainstream movements but also the possibility that they will engender violent offshoots. Islamist social movements owe much of their success to their links to a wide variety of associations, charitable societies, neighborhood groups, and social service organizations that they do not control directly but on whom they rely to mobilize large numbers of followers. These informal, broad-based networks may also harbor radical groups, governments worry. The fears are not totally unfounded. There is strong evidence that many of the groups that came together to form Al Qaeda in the 1990s had their roots in more mainstream movements, including those that developed on Egyptian university campuses, eventually breaking with them, deriding their timidity, and turning to violence.

In the 1970s and 1980s, several regimes experimented with a bifurcated policy toward Islamists, tolerating the mainstream movements but suppressing the radical ones. The upsurge in radical movements and the aborted electoral victory of Islamists in Algeria in 1992 led most regimes to rethink that approach. Egypt, Algeria, and Tunisia have all moved against mainstream Islamist movements; Jordan, Yemen, Palestine, and Morocco have kept a wary eye on them without becoming equally repressive.

The reactions of Islamist organizations to the more repressive environment suggest that the commitment to nonviolence by the mainstream organizations is real. Whereas the radical groups have responded by becoming even more extreme in their ideas and action, mainstream groups have not turned to violence but simply try to navigate a careful course in the new environment.

The commitment to nonviolence by mainstream Islamist movements ceases abruptly, however, when it comes to the issue of Israel and of Palestinian rights. Virtually all Islamist organizations—and some non-Islamist ones as well—believe that violence against Israel constitutes legitimate resistance, rather than terrorism. For that reason, two political organizations that believe in the importance of participation in normal electoral politics, Hamas in Palestine and Hizbollah in Lebanon, maintain armed groups and have no intention of dismantling them. Their position is widely accepted in the region. Indeed, organizations that consistently disavow violence within their own political systems condone a wide range of actions against Israeli targets (and more recently against American targets in Iraq) as legitimate resistance. Some have gone as far as condoning violence against civilians, not just attacks against military targets.

Efforts to balance commitment to nonviolence with the recognition that Palestinians have the right to resist have led some organizations to considerable ambiguity. The example of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood illustrates both how much mainstream movements have committed to nonviolence yet how difficult it still is for them to apply the idea to the Israeli issue. Half a century ago, the Muslim Brotherhood did not hesitate to undertake armed action against Israel and against British troops in the Suez Canal zone. In recent years, the Brotherhood has only offered verbal and sometimes financial support for Palestinian groups. In a recent interview, the Brotherhood's Supreme Guide even stated that the movement would respect Egypt's international agreements, implicitly recognizing the peace treaty with Israel. But in the same period, another leading official of the organization spoke of the need to prepare for *jihad* with the "enemy in the east"—Israel.

It is clear that the movements take advantage of the fact they do not hold political power to craft positions that simultaneously draw on popular sentiments against Israel without advocating paths

that strike their audiences as potentially disastrous or wholly irresponsible. The sympathy of the movements for the Palestinian cause is clearly deeply felt and cast in largely religious terms, but it is far less clear what steps Islamists in power would actually take.

The positions of Hamas and Hizbollah are extreme manifestations of the same ambiguity. Neither group threatens to use violence to gain power domestically; for that, they turn to the ballot box. Both, however, claim the right to resist an external enemy—Israel. And their positions are often broadly popular and not simply supported by their core constituencies.

The issue of Israel and Palestine is likely to keep Islamist groups in the gray zone on the issue of violence for the foreseeable future. It is exceedingly difficult for organizations seeking popular support in a region where pro-Palestinian and anti-Israeli sentiments run high to renounce violence in all circumstances, implicitly asserting that Palestinians do not have the right to resist occupation. But as long as mainstream Islamist groups continue to carve out exceptions concerning the use of violence or, worse, maintain armed wings, the sincerity of their commitment to political means will continue to be called into question. The electoral victory of Hamas greatly raises the salience of this issue. While all mainstream movements would very much like to see a successful Hamas-based government, they are unlikely in the short run to call publicly for more than tactical modifications in Hamas's opposition to a two-state solution.

Political Pluralism

Although Islamist parties have participated peacefully in many elections and always respected their outcome, they are still accused of being inherently opposed to political pluralism. Islamist parties now compete in Morocco, Jordan, Lebanon, Kuwait, Palestine, and even Algeria, where new Islamist organizations have registered after the civil war, although the parties that almost won in 1991 are still outlawed. Such parties have also competed in elections in the Sudan during every period of democracy the country has experienced, and an Islamist party rules now, although as a result of a military coup, not of democracy. Candidates openly affiliated with Islamist organizations have also participated in elections in Egypt, Bahrain, and, at the municipal level, Saudi Arabia. Nevertheless, Arab governments systematically invoke the nightmare of bearded fanatics misusing the ballot box to capture the state and do away with democracy. Many non-Islamists share this view. These suspicions are reinforced by the ambiguities in the position of Islamist movements.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Islamists prided themselves for upholding a model of politics and society different from the Western one. They distrusted liberal democracy because it emphasized the rights of individuals rather than the welfare of the *umma*, the community. And when Islamists started participating in pluralist electoral politics, as in Jordan, Kuwait, and Egypt, they viewed participation as an instrument to gain power and thus help the community find its way back to the true spirit of Islam. In this period, marked by successive waves of populist Islamist mobilization against secular movements and liberal intellectuals, many Islamists rejected the legitimacy of secular forces or tolerated their presence resentfully. Inevitably, Islamist organizations were in turn considered illegitimate by incumbent governments and liberal organizations and suffered considerable political losses as a result. In many countries, Islamist organizations were barred from participating in normal politics.

During the 1990s, Islamists started to re-evaluate their position in order to avoid further government repression and to take advantage of the growing demand for reform in many countries. Mainstream movements not only accepted that secular forces were legitimate political actors but

started viewing them as potential allies in a battle for democratic reform Islamists would lead. Many organizations chose to set aside their differences with the secular groups on issues of ideological and policy choices, focusing instead on the shared objective of challenging the authoritarian grip of incumbent governments. As part of their new stance, Islamist organizations have embraced the new terminology of democratic politics. Transparent elections, rotation of power, and political freedoms have all become integral parts of Islamist vocabulary. Islamists also adopted some liberal human rights vocabulary, perhaps a natural development for groups subjected to harsh state repression. Indeed, they often criticized secular opposition forces not for their liberal principles but for hypocritical silence when Islamists' rights were violated.

At the same time, Islamist movements started developing sophisticated strategies to increase their credibility and appease fears of their intentions. Conscious of the vicious circle of violence perpetrated by security forces and radical Islamists precipitated by the threatened Islamists' victory in the 1991 Algerian elections, the strongest movements have deliberately curbed the scope of their political participation to limit their electoral success and avoid scaring governments into adopting repressive measures. The Moroccan PJD and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood decided to field candidates in fewer than 30 percent of districts in their respective countries' most recent legislative elections, thus limiting the extent of their possible success. Suspicion of these movements by the respective governments, secular parties, and international actors has not disappeared, but it is not as high as it would be had they shown less restraint. "Participation, not domination" seems to be the motto of Islamists taking part in electoral politics.

Nevertheless, two issues raise questions about the Islamists' commitment to pluralism: the constant references by even the most liberal among them to the Islamic *marji`iya* and their seeming reluctance to embrace tolerance for all viewpoints. In discussing their political views, Islamists invariably profess to share the same values as liberals on everything, from women's participation to diplomatic relations with Israel, as long as everything is handled "within the framework of Islamic principles" and "in accordance with the true interests of the community." This raises important questions. Would Islamist movements be willing to abide by democratically reached decisions if they did not fit within the proper Islamic *marji`iya*? Would the leaders be willing to stand up to their more ideological followers and defend the legitimacy of views other than their own? Are they willing to accept that while Islam is one solution—the best even—it is not the only solution?

These questions would acquire enormous importance if Islamists participated in government or acquired enough power to influence policy decisions, as has happened in Palestine and may very well happen in Morocco with the next parliamentary elections. There are some encouraging signs of growing Islamist acceptance of non-Islamist solutions but also some discouraging signs of intolerance. On the positive side, the PJD participated in the negotiations for the new Moroccan Family Code of 2003 and accepted its provisions, although they do not bear a clearly Islamist stamp. The party's leadership defended its position by arguing that the code had been adopted through a democratic process and had to be respected, thus extending the concept of Islamic *marji`iya* to encompass all decisions reached democratically (although the PJD also argues that for the same reason liberal parties should accept criminal laws that sentence people to amputation of limbs or stoning, if such laws were democratically enacted). The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, however, still takes a much narrower approach. Its electoral slogan "Islam is the Solution" did not suggest tolerance of other views, causing consternation among secular forces, particularly among Copts. The Brotherhood tried to minimize the damage after the elections by inviting other groups to participate

in a dialogue, but the invitation failed to dispel doubts and generate confidence. Dialogue has started taking place, but at a very leisurely pace.

It is unlikely that Islamist organizations will succeed in removing doubts about the limits of their tolerance as long as they have both a political and a religious agenda. At present, they can be tolerant and conciliatory in their political capacity yet still preach the absolute truth and rightness of Islam. Christian democratic parties in Europe have demonstrated that it is possible for parties that subscribe to a particular creed to distance themselves from religious dogma sufficiently to gain credibility as genuinely democratic parties. Even the most liberal Islamist parties have not reached that point at this time. As a result, the belief persists that if Islamists were to win power by the democratic means they advocate as political organizations, they would impose on their country the solutions they preach as religious organizations.

Civil and Political Rights

Islamist parties that seek power through the political process are ardent advocates of civil and political rights and liberties, insisting on freedom of speech, religion, and association—within the Islamic *marji`iya*, of course. To many liberals, this has the threatening ring of Orwellian new-speak. Most Arab liberals are willing to accept a degree of restriction to civil and political liberties to prevent open criticism of Islam and sacred symbols. They worry, however, that under an Islamist regime restrictions would become extensive rather than minimalist, not only preventing unrestrained attacks on the religion rejected by the overwhelming majority of people in the region, but also barring any interpretation of Islam other than the one favored by a particular group.

A major problem concerning the Islamists' attitude toward civil and political liberties is the tendency among Islamists to subordinate the rights of individuals to the good of the community. The tendency is manifested in several ways. At the philosophical level, Islamists have trouble accepting the unfettered freedom of individuals to choose for themselves because they believe that the community has a common interest that overrides that of individuals. Islamists concede that there can be disagreement about what the interest of the community is but find it difficult to accept that every individual is entitled to his separate version of the good. Fear of dividing the community also leads Islamists to reject partisanship, at least in principle.

In practice, however, Islamist movements that have entered the political arena have already accepted partisanship and pluralism, making their philosophical stand moot. But problems still arise over civil and political rights. There are sometimes strong incentives for Islamist movements to launch strong attacks on certain forms of expression. Islamist movements often clash with liberals on issues of religious freedom when that becomes an effective tactic for mobilizing supporters or isolating opponents. In some societies, such as in Kuwait, Islamist leaders have often criticized individual intellectuals or officials who have endorsed a practice deemed non-Islamic. The aim is often not simply to defend a society against a perceived evil but to outflank their political adversaries by forcing a controversy on an issue—such as a risqué television program or a seemingly scandalous book—where they are likely to garner public sympathy. This is the sort of maneuver that should be very familiar to those who live in democratic societies, but it can be deployed to illiberal ends.

Doubts about the Islamists' true commitment to respect civil and political rights and liberties are particularly intense concerning women's rights and the rights of religious minorities.

The Rights of Women

The issue of women's rights and women's equality is extremely contentious, dividing Islamists and non-Islamists. Islamists are accused of intending to deprive women of civil and political rights; remove women from public life; treat them as minors, forever under the tutelage of a male family member; and impose restrictive dress. For their part, Islamists proclaim their respect for women and their commitment to women's rights within the Islamic *marji`iya*. They claim that it is their opponents who seek to impose their views on the entire society, intruding in the intimate sphere of women's rights and personal status, harassing men and women wearing dress deemed Islamic, and blocking their access to public institutions such as schools, universities, and polling places. Nevertheless, even in this contentious area Islamists and non-Islamists are beginning to forge compromises in some countries.

In general, debates over women's rights rarely focus on issues of political participation. By and large Islamist parties have not fought hard to keep women from exercising their political rights. Social customs and male prejudice, to be sure, still keep most women away from public life. As a result, women's presence in high-level government posts and parliaments is extremely limited and usually the result of deliberate affirmative action initiatives. But almost all Arab countries that hold some kind of elections extend the franchise to women as well. And several assign a quota of parliamentary seats to women. Outside of the Arabian Peninsula, these steps are not very controversial. Inside the Arabian Peninsula, there is often strong opposition to women's suffrage, but there are also signs of change. In Kuwait, where Islamist parties fought a hard struggle against the vote for women, even blocking the government's efforts to extend the franchise at one point, Islamists accepted their defeat in a 2005 parliamentary vote.

Disagreement between Islamists and non-Islamists is intense when it comes to women's civil rights and in particular to personal status issues—marriage, divorce, child custody, inheritance, and the right of women to transmit citizenship to their children. In all countries of the region, such issues are ultimately based on religious law, usually as codified and approved by parliaments but sometimes adjudicated directly by judges interpreting religious texts and the writings of Islamic jurists. Especially in countries where the state has not legislated a specific formulation of Islamic law, intense debates occur over what parts of the Islamic legal tradition are to be implemented and applied. Nevertheless, there are very few advocates of a completely secular approach to family matters. Thus the contest over women's rights and personal status almost always focuses on the appropriate interpretation and application of Islamic law in areas like divorce rights, child custody and support, and enforcement of the *mahr,* a financial payment made or pledged by a groom to his bride.

Mainstream Islamist movements are beginning to move away from dogmatic positions concerning personal status laws as long as they are involved in their formulation. The Moroccan PJD, as we pointed out earlier, participated in the discussions of Morocco's new personal status law in 2003 and worked to convince its followers that the new law was democratically enacted and thus had to be accepted even if it was not based on a strict interpretation of the *sharia*. Secularists are also making concessions. In Egypt, advocates of women's rights have made a concerted effort to show the reforms they advocate are rooted in the Islamic legal tradition. They have also been willing to make some concessions on issues particularly objectionable to Islamists, thereby building a measure of consensus or at least of grudging tolerance in Islamist movements' platforms.

The experience of Egypt and Morocco thus suggests that there is a new flexibility on the part of Islamists in opposition movements or in the religious establishment close to the government on women's issues. Examples of such flexibility in other countries are harder to find, however, largely because few have undertaken extensive reform of family status laws. Until the new flexibility of Islamists on the issue of women's civil rights can be tested more extensively, this will remain a gray area of great concern.

Religious Minorities

Given the religious homogeneity of most Arab countries, the issue of the rights of non-Muslim minorities tends to receive less attention in the region that it does in the United States. Mainstream Islamist movements believe, in theory, that Christians and followers of other monotheist religions such as Judaism should be free to organize their own affairs on issues of worship and personal status, but, in practice, this is not an issue to which they give much attention. Even in highly heterogeneous settings, such as in Lebanon and the Palestinian territories, Islamists either recognize equal rights for different religious communities, as Hizbollah does in Lebanon, or devote almost no attention to the subject in the context of broader conflicts. Egypt is the major exception; in recent years, both the Muslim Brotherhood and its moderate offshoot, the Wasat Party, have intensely debated their positions toward Egypt's native Christian minority, the Copts.

On the abstract level, the two movements regard Copts as citizens entitled to equal civil and political rights and agree that there are parts of the *sharia* that cannot be imposed on non-Muslims. However, the two organizations differ fundamentally on other issues concerning religious minorities. The Wasat Party, which defines itself as a civil party with an Islamic *marji`iya*, opens its membership to all Egyptian citizens regardless of their religion. In fact, a few Coptic intellectual figures have already joined the party. The Brotherhood, however, sees itself as a religious movement and thus excludes non-Muslims from its ranks. Similarly, the Wasat platform calls for no limits on Copts' civil and political rights, but the Brotherhood platform specifies that the head of state must be a Muslim. Furthermore, the Wasat Party acknowledges that Copts have been marginalized in Egyptian politics and calls for affirmative action, including imposing quotas in the legislative and the executive branches. The Muslim Brotherhood views such provisions with suspicion.

We have focused here on the position of Islamist movements vis-à-vis non-Muslim minorities, using the Wasat Party and Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt as examples because recent parliamentary elections there have forced these groups to take a stand on their position vis-à-vis religious minorities, so more information is available. The real battle in many other countries, however, will not be fought not on the rights of Christian minorities, which are often small and composed mainly of foreigners, but on the rights of Islamic minorities, particularly Shia in Sunni dominated countries or, more rarely, Sunnis in Shia dominated ones. In countries where the Muslim population is divided among followers of various sects, Islamist movements will face particularly difficult challenges.

The issue of religious minorities will only be resolved if Islamist movements accept the principle of universal citizenship without discrimination on the basis of creed or any other attribute. So long as Islamist movements retain their dual political-religious identity, acceptance of full equality of all groups is impossible. Religious movements cannot be open to adherents of all faiths, but democratic movements must be open to all citizens. The Islamist organizations that have gone farthest in accepting equal rights for religious minorities are, not surprisingly, purely political organizations,

such as the Moroccan PJD and the Egyptian Wasat Party. Without such evolution, the position of Islamist parties regarding religious minorities is bound to remain highly ambiguous.

CONCLUSIONS

The six gray zones in the thinking and practice of mainstream Islamist movements—Islamic law, violence, pluralism, civil and political rights, women's rights, and religious minorities—are extensive and impact a number of crucial political issues. The resolution of these issues will determine whether the rise of Islamist movements leads the countries of the Arab world, finally, toward democracy or, conversely, to a new form of authoritarianism with an Islamic character.

The ambiguous position of many Islamist movements on these crucial issues is a matter of concern because such movements are emerging as major players in the changing political landscape of the Middle East. Further political openings will only enhance the importance of Islamist parties for the foreseeable future.

For international organizations and foreign governments convinced that democratic transformation of the Middle East is crucial to the security of the rest of the world, the fact that the most important opposition movements in most countries appear stuck between religious dogma and democratic political choices is problematic. It would, of course, be much more reassuring, much more desirable, if the major political actors in the Middle East were secular organizations with impeccable liberal credentials and a clear track record of democratic politics. But liberal organizations capable of mobilizing large constituencies simply do not exist in Arab countries today. As a result, Islamist groups will remain the most important opposition force for the foreseeable future, whether or not secular Arabs and Western governments like it. Only repression could curb the influence of Islamist movements. The experience of Algeria, which suffered a bloody civil war after elections were canceled in 1992 to deny the expected victory to Islamists, offers a reminder that repression has a high cost.

Mainstream Islamist organizations are so influential because they have little competition. No ideology in the Arab world has at present the appeal of the Islamist message, which powerfully combines a religious ideal with the concept of social justice—a concept concretely embodied in the network of service organizations that Islamist parties have set up in many countries. Liberal democrats have been unable so far to fashion a message attractive to large numbers of their countrymen. Their abstract message about democracy resonates only at a very general level and has failed to serve as the basis for political mobilization. Arab citizens are not averse to democracy, as a growing number of public opinion surveys shows. When provided with an opportunity to participate in an open political process, they do so. Yet, when they vote, they do not choose to cast their ballots for liberal democratic parties. The socialist message of the Nasserite organizations and the Ba'ath parties of Syria and Iraq was once extremely influential but has now lost its attraction, and the segment of the message that still resonates, that of social justice, has been appropriated by the Islamists. Remarkably, Islamist movements have managed to incorporate key elements of the liberal platform—demands for accountability, constitutional reform, an end to political repression, and clean government—into their agenda. Indeed, the only true ideological competition Islamist parties face in the Arab world is ethnic or religious nationalisms. As Iraq shows, the unleashing of such nationalisms is a serious obstacle to democratic transformation.

Organizationally, too, moderate Islamists are a world ahead of other parties or movements. In part this is because they have been able to circumvent the obstacles Arab governments place in the way of any independent political organization by using mosques as meeting places and religion as their message. Partly, too, their success is the result of their clear understanding of the importance of creating organizations and mobilizing constituencies in a systematic fashion, something other parties have neglected.

Because of the ideological advantage enjoyed by Islamist groups and the years of work that many have invested in organizing, the possibility that the already existing or new non-Islamist parties will be able to compete effectively with them in the near future is not good. We are not implying that Middle East countries will never be able to generate effective secular parties; rather, that Islamists have had a headstart, and in the next electoral cycle and beyond, they will likely be the most important opposition force in most countries. Democracy assistance in the neutral form of training for all political parties, or even in the form of direct funding of secular parties and liberal civil society organizations, will not alter this reality.

As a result, the future direction of moderate Islamist movements depends greatly on how they work their way through the murkiness of the gray zones as they react to the challenges of the changing political context in their countries. Aging leaders, popular dissatisfaction, international pressure, and of course the growth of Islamist movements, are all factors forcing Arab governments to introduce some reforms and to take some steps in the direction of democracy. Most of the measures introduced thus far are largely cosmetic—no regime save the Palestinian has given up significant power to fairly elected institutions. But even such cautious steps have created new possibilities for organized opposition forces, and thus, for Islamist parties.

Studies of political transitions suggest that new challenges and opportunities tend to produce splits within governing coalitions between hardliners who want to perpetuate the status quo and the reformers who want to move forward. Less discussed is the fact that opposition organizations also react to new challenges by developing the same kinds of internal divisions. In all mainstream Islamist movements today, there are tensions between more open-minded, often younger members who think the situation requires new ideas and political tactics and the old guard, hesitant to abandon the old positions. Given the political influence of Islamist movements, the outcome of this struggle will determine the future of political reform in many countries.

The balance between reformers and hardliners differs from one Islamist movement to another. Reformers are clearly the most influential force in the Moroccan PJD and the Egyptian Wasat Party; in fact, the latter was launched by a breakaway reformist faction of the Muslim Brotherhood. These parties have put forward alternative ideological formulas that retain the overall Islamic orientation of the movement while gaining the necessary political maneuvering room. In the PJD's platform, insistence on the application of the *sharia* is replaced by a loose reference to general Islamic guidelines *(al-maqasid al-ʿamma).* The 2004 Wasat Party program calls for establishing a democratic political system in Egypt within the framework of the Islamic *marjiʿiya*. In other movements, such as the Jordanian Islamic Action Front and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, however, the reformists have not yet won the battle.

The outcome of these internal battles will be influenced by how the governments of the respective countries deal with the Islamist groups and, to a lesser extent, by the position taken by outside players, particularly the United States. In countries where the government chooses heavy-handed repression as the means to deal with the growing influence of mainstream Islamist movements, the reformers may very well lose out. In fact some studies have already shown that the influence of the reformers in the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood has waxed when the government has allowed some form of political participation and waned when the government turned more repressive. Political success in a pluralist electoral system, on the other hand, strengthens the side of reformers and encourages parties to change even further. Experiences of some Islamists outside the Arab world—especially that of the AKP in Turkey—suggest that movements that take on government responsibility or even succeed in forming viable opposition blocs are under pressure to deliver concrete changes to their constituencies and thus move beyond rigid ideological stances. Only when Islamists are totally shut out of legitimate political participation—or, conversely, when they achieve total domination (as in Iran)—do they avoid these pressures.

No matter what happens on the wider political scene, however, the murkiness of the gray zones is not going to disappear completely any time soon. Nor will the suspicions of Middle East governments, other opposition parties, and Western governments. After more than three years of democratic behavior after its victory in the 2002 elections, Turkey's Justice and Development Party is still regarded with suspicion by some inside the country, including elements of the military. Doubts also linger abroad, although both the United States and European countries have at times singled out Turkey as the proof that Islamist parties can embrace democracy.

The persistence of doubts is inevitable. Even if Islamist parties take moderate positions while fighting for a legitimate political role, nobody can be sure how they would act if they gained power. By extrapolating from past experiences, it is possible to forecast probable trends but not to offer certainties.

Uncertainty is a fact of life in politics. It is a defining feature of democratic politics. Evidence from the research leading to this analysis suggests that the reformist currents in the Islamist movement are real, that they are becoming much more sophisticated and flexible in their thinking, and that recent political success in some countries is increasing their influence within their respective organizations. It also suggests that gray zones remain extensive. Finally, the evidence suggests that in most Arab countries there is no possibility of encouraging a process of democratization or at least of liberalization, without seeing at the same time the increased influence of Islamist movements. We can only conclude that a policy of engagement with Islamist organizations, particularly with their reformist wings, is the only constructive option open to organizations and governments that believe democratic development in the Middle East is in everybody's interest.

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