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Setting Standards: How the West should respond to political Islam

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KEY POINTS

- Islamist parties have taken the opportunity provided to them by the 'Arab Spring' to achieve power through elections, benefitting from their strong organisational structures and good public image in a traditional societal environment.
- This phenomenon has sparked a debate in the West between optimists, who believe these parties will moderate to cope with the realities of political power, and pessimists, who fear they will simply use democracy to gain power and promote radical, ideological agendas.
- Islamists themselves are not monolithic, and are struggling to balance practical political demands with their ideological roots. At a regional level they are offered two competing models of Islamic governance in Turkey and Iran.
- The West should use the leverage it gains from its economic support to apply criteria for dealing with Islamist parties, in order to influence their development. Those criteria should relate to the Islamist parties' positions on: non-violence, adherence to values of democracy, the application of Sharia law in public life and attitudes to the West and Israel.
- For the sake of the peace process, it is particularly important to maintain strict conditions with regard to Hamas, and to make clear to Egyptian Islamists that tampering with the Israel-Egypt peace treaty is a clear red line.

INTRODUCTION: 'ARAB SPRING' OR 'ISLAMIST WINTER'?

As winds of dramatic change sweep across the Middle East, observers wonder how to characterise what is happening. To many observers, what was originally dubbed optimistically as the 'Arab Spring' has now turned into an 'Islamist Winter'. In recent months Islamist parties have won elections by relatively wide margins in North Africa. In Tunisia the al-Nahda Party took over 40% of the vote. In Morocco the Justice and Development Party (JDP) took over 25%. In Egypt over 70% of votes went to the political

alliances led the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) and the Salafist Al-Nour Party. Islamist parties also stand a good chance of winning upcoming elections in Algeria and Libya.

They seem strong in other parts of the region too. In a recent parliamentary election in Kuwait, Islamist political parties won 46% of votes cast. In Syria, the Muslim Brotherhood is an important part of the organised opposition against the regime. Several years before the Arab awakening, Islamist parties scored successes in Iraqi elections, in the Palestinian Authority (where Hamas won Parliamentary elections in 2006) and in Lebanon (where Shiite Hezbollah has become the dominant party in the government). There is a longer precedent for the role of Islamic parties in Arab politics, such as in Algeria (where the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) won elections in 1991 and was forced out of power leading to a civil war) and in Sudan. In Saudi Arabia the royal family has a long-established and close cooperation with the clerical Wahhabi establishment, drawing legitimacy from it, and many religious laws apply.

The strong showing of Islamist parties in recent elections comes despite the fact that they did not spearhead last year's revolutions, but stood on the sidelines when they broke out. Several factors explain their success. First, Arab societies are characteristically traditional. Islam plays an important role in people's lives, making them receptive to Islamic messages or messages with a religious tone. Second, Islamist parties are better organised and funded than other parties, due to decades of organised overt and covert political activism under oppressive regimes, and have made good use of mosques as centres of recruitment and activity. Third, whereas the autocratic regimes were perceived as neglecting the needs of the common citizen, Islamist movements have filled part of the void and provided a network of basic social services, especially to the poor and needy, as a form of religious and political outreach known as 'da'wa'. Finally, Islamists enjoy an image of being non-corrupt. They have mostly campaigned on platforms emphasising socio-economic issues and anti-corruption over their Islamic ideology and traditional simplistic slogan stipulating, "Islam is the solution."

BETWEEN OPTIMISTS AND PESSIMISTS

The rise of political Islam stirs a serious debate between optimists and pessimists, first and foremost in the Middle East itself. Optimists contend that we are currently witnessing a new, modern version of political Islam, which is more moderate and open to democracy and Western liberal values than we have known in the past. As examples they cite moderate public statements by Sheikh Rachid Ghannouchi, leader of the Tunisian Islamist Al-Nahda party, as well remarks by officials in the Egyptian and Moroccan Islamist parties, upholding respect and adherence to the rules of democracy, basic freedoms, the rights of women and religious minorities and pluralism. Also cited are promises not to enforce strict Islamic rules in public life, such as banning alcohol, bikinis and interest-based banking.

Optimists mention the fact that these parties had women and non-Muslims run on their lists[1] and are forming coalitions with secular parties. They note that the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood recently joined secular and Coptic leaders in signing the Al-Azhar Charter, a declaration initiated by Al-Azhar Islamic University calling to protect broad basic freedoms, including the freedoms of belief, opinion, expression, scientific research, and creativity in literature and arts.[2] Optimists also underline certain statements by Muslim Brotherhood officials in Egypt exhibiting openness to the West and promising not to abrogate the Israeli-Egyptian peace agreement.

On the other hand, pessimists retort that these statements do not represent a genuine transformation towards liberalism. Rather, they say they are a thin veneer covering a deep-rooted ideology to serve short-term tactical aims. In the pessimists' view, Islamist parties have not internalised the real values of democracy and liberalism, nor can they be expected to do so overnight. They are, for the pessimists, essentially anti-pluralistic and xenophobic groups, who are merely exploiting democracy to gain power, but will abandon it once elected, like Hezbollah and Hamas. In this context, the former Supreme Guide of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Muhammad Mehdi Akef, is cited. Akef, following the 2005 Egyptian elections, said that, "for us, democracy is like a pair of slippers that we wear until we reach the bathroom,

and then we take them off." Pessimists also point to the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood's website which is rife with antisemitic text.[3] There is also a notable difference between Islamists' statements in Arabic and English, which are often contradictory.[4] Ultimately, say the pessimists, Islamists will have to be tested over time by their deeds, not merely their words.

The debate also relates to the future direction of Islamist parties. Optimists contend that under the pressure of governance and political responsibility, Islamists will have to moderate or else face losing popular support and power. Some believe that we are currently experiencing a necessary historic phase until the myth surrounding Islamists, born out of years of fighting corrupt repressive regimes, dissipates and they are reduced to their 'natural size'. Pessimists, on the other hand, ask what damage, perhaps irreversible, will be inflicted in the meantime. Furthermore, who guarantees that Islamists will cede control through a democratic process in the future and not use their power to silence opposition, entrench their own position and ban free fair elections, as exemplified by the Islamic Republic in Iran and Hamas in Gaza?

Political Islam is not a monolithic phenomenon across the Middle East. Islamist movements and parties exhibit differences and nuances varying between different countries and within the same country. The Muslim Brotherhood movement in Egypt, for example, has split into several parties and there is a clear difference between the Brotherhood and the Salafists, who advocate strict Islamic laws in the public domain and national life. No less important are the contradictory statements made by Islamists on a variety of topics, which demonstrate that in moving from opposition to government, they find themselves compelled to balance conflicting pressures. On the one hand stands their deep-rooted ideology. In the case of Egypt (unlike Tunisia) civil society at large is much more traditional than secular and the Brotherhood is also under pressure from the more extreme Salafists. On the other hand, Islamists face the need to provide practical solutions to the population, especially socio-economic solutions in the face of severe economic crises. In contrast to Iran this is, in the words of Thomas

Friedman, “political Islam without oil”.^[5] These movements are therefore compelled to present as moderate a face as possible to the international community.

The result is at times ambiguity, or a somewhat awkward compromise. Some Islamist leaders choose to emphasise that while they will seek to introduce Islamic values into the public domain, they will pursue education and public activism rather than legislation and enforcement, and in any case will seek a gradual societal transformation. A recent article written by the Muslim Brotherhood party’s leader, Muhammad Mursi,^[6] is an example of this ambiguity. Mursi wrote: “This new structure [of Egypt] respects freedom and protects the basic rights of every Egyptian within the framework of the original religious values... The new structure... also gives women all their rights in a way that establishes balance between their rights and duties.”

An important balancing factor is that the winning Islamist parties are not alone in the field and have to reconcile their ideology and political positions with those of other internal forces. In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood has to come to terms with the ruling Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) and in the coming months will have to do so with a newly elected president. In Morocco, the King still calls the shots even though he acknowledged the Justice and Development Party’s victory and appointed its leader, Abd-El-Ilah Ben-Kirane, as prime minister. In all cases where they have attained electoral success, Islamist parties’ ability to govern depends on forming coalitions, and they are forging such partnerships with secular parties.

In Tunisia, the new president Moncef Marzuki, a former dissident and human rights activist, comes from a secular party. In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood campaigned as part of a coalition with secular parties under the title the ‘Democratic Alliance’, and made known its clear preference for a coalition with secular parties rather than with the Salafist Al-Nour party. Finally, all of these parties have to take into consideration the voice of the street, empowered by the revolution. The initiators of the mass Tahrir Square demonstrations may have been shoved aside but now the populace has found its

voice it will not easily accept the substituting of one form of dictatorship for another.

In the broader regional context, Islamists rising to power are offered two competing models of Islamic governance in the Turkish model and the Iranian model. The Turkish model seems much more attractive to Islamists who now have to shape their own future. For one thing, they are Sunnis and reject the Iranian-Shiite model of clerical rule (‘Wilayat El-Faqih’). For another, their perception of the Turkish model is that it implies no necessary contradiction between political Islam on one hand and democracy and economic success on the other. ^[7] The Tunisian al-Nahda party openly cites Turkey as a source of inspiration and it is no coincidence that the Islamic party in Morocco took the same name as the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Turkey.

WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT?

While the international community had little to do with the eruption of revolutionary energies in the Middle East and is limited in its ability to affect their direction, it does have some tools of influence. The tension between Islamic ideology and political responsibility, including dependence on international economic support in the face of dire economic straits, affords the international community some leverage over developing policies in this new landscape. In practical terms, the international community should apply four main criteria for judging Islamist parties and movements rising to power, for conducting a dialogue with them and for dealing with them in general. These four criteria are:

Commitment to non-violence. Many of the Islamist parties and activists have a history of violence but renounced it at a certain stage under regime pressure. It should be noted, however, that most of them have expressed support for the use of ‘armed resistance’, including suicide bombings, against US, Western and Israeli targets in the Middle East.

Adherence to values of democracy. This breaks into a long list of sub-categories, including safeguarding the variety of basic freedoms, protecting the rights of women and of religious and other minorities, making room for internationally supported local pro-

democracy movements, and allowing for free and fair elections even when Islamists stand to lose.

Approach to Islamic law (Sharia) in public life. To what extent are Islamic norms introduced into public and national life and enforced in a manner that contradicts internationally accepted norms of democracy and human rights? This category covers the framing of Sharia in newly-written constitutions and its application in public life.[8] It also refers to contentious issues such as the freedom to criticise religion[9] and to convert from Islam to another religion.[10]

Attitudes towards the West and Israel. This includes honouring the Israeli-Egyptian peace agreement. The thinking and rhetoric of even the more reform-minded Islamists are by and large characterised by anti-Israeli and anti-Western attitudes. Tunisian Rachid Ghannouchi, for example, last year called Israel “a germ” which ought to be removed from the Arab region, and predicted this would happen by 2027. In the past he supported violent attacks against US forces in Iraq and suicide bombing against Israelis. An attempt to introduce an article banning normalisation with Israel into the newly drafted Tunisian constitution was recently aborted through Western insistence.

There are varying degrees with which Islamist parties might apply these criteria. No Arab country has ever met all of them to their fullest extent, yet the international community has dealt with most of them and has cooperated with many of them. In applying these standards therefore, the international community should first decide where to draw red lines which set conditions under which they will reject direct engagement with Islamist groups. These should include groups with violent or extreme anti-democratic, anti-Western and anti-Israeli attitudes and behaviours. The international community should also decide where to draw the line of extending or withdrawing economic and other forms of support to Islamist governments it engages. This is not a rigid formula. Elements have to be weighed by their relative significance in a given context.

It is along these lines that the international community should relate to the Palestinian Islamist movement Hamas. Following the recent wave of

Islamist electoral victories, Hamas prime minister in Gaza, Ismail Haniyeh, stated that Hamas is a “Jihadi movement of the Brotherhood with a Palestinian face.”[11] By referring to the origins of Hamas as a Brotherhood-affiliated movement he was implying, among other things, that the international community should engage with it as it now engages other Islamist parties. The international community ought to stick by existing conditions for an international dialogue with Hamas in Gaza, as put forward by the Quartet (composed of the US, the UN, the EU and Russia) in 2006, following Hamas’s victory in Palestinian elections. These conditions include renouncing violence, recognising Israel and accepting past Palestinian agreements with Israel. In the specific intra-Palestinian and Israeli-Palestinian contexts it is important to maintain these conditions in the face of an organisation that has never renounced violence, opposes peace with Israel and any recognition of it, threatens Palestinian moderates and has yet to practically enable Palestinian elections.

Furthermore, maintaining the Israeli-Egyptian peace agreement intact is of special strategic importance as an essential pillar of regional stability. While Egyptian Islamist leaders indicated that they would abide by official Egyptian agreements, some of them have said that the agreement with Israel should be put to a national referendum. The international community would do well to make clear that any tampering with the peace agreement, including a national referendum, would be regarded as crossing a red line.

CONCLUSION

The rise of political Islam ushered in by the Arab awakening sets the stage in the foreseeable future for an environment less favourable to Israel and the West. There should be no illusions about the Islamists. Left to their own designs they will lean heavily on their ideology. However, under domestic and international pressure they will have to mitigate it. That is where the international community should step in and play a role.

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[1] In fact, women make up only about two percent of the newly elected Egyptian parliament. In the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party their representation is even lower and there are no non-Muslims in the party's parliamentary faction.

[2] This did not stop the Muslim Brotherhood from producing its own, different, version of a suggested new constitution for Egypt.

[3] See Chernitsky, B., Antisemitic and Anti-Israel Articles on Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood Website, MEMRI, 13/1/2012.

[4] See Pollock, D., Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood and its Record of Double Talk, The Washington Post, 27/1/2012.

[5] Friedman, T., Political Islam Without Oil, New York Times, 10/1/2012.

[6] Egypt's Freedom and Justice Party: Our Vision for the Future, A-Sharq Al-Awsat, 8/1/2012.

[7] It should however be noted that Turkey has shown some disturbing illiberal trends, with a very high number of journalists put in jail.

[8] The 1971 Egyptian constitution defined Sharia as the main source of legislation but this was not interpreted in a strict way.

[9] Egyptian telecoms mogul and political activist Naguib Sawiris faced death threats and legal charges in recent months after he tweeted a picture of Mickey Mouse with an Islamic beard and Minnie with a veil.

[10] Ghannouchi was recently asked, while speaking at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, a Washington-based think tank, about his attitude towards the issue of conversion from Islam. Conversion is protected under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights but most Muslim jurists consider it forbidden. Ghannouchi replied that he does not believe conversion from Islam is forbidden by Islamic law, but noted that this view is not yet accepted by Sheikh Yusuf Qaradawi, his superior in the International Association of Muslim Scholars.

[11] Haniyeh made this statement in a meeting with the Supreme Guide of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, in December 2011.

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Cover Photo: Friday prayers in Tahrir Square, Cairo, Egypt on 3 March 2011 (Photo by Ahmed Abdel-fatah/ Flickr.)