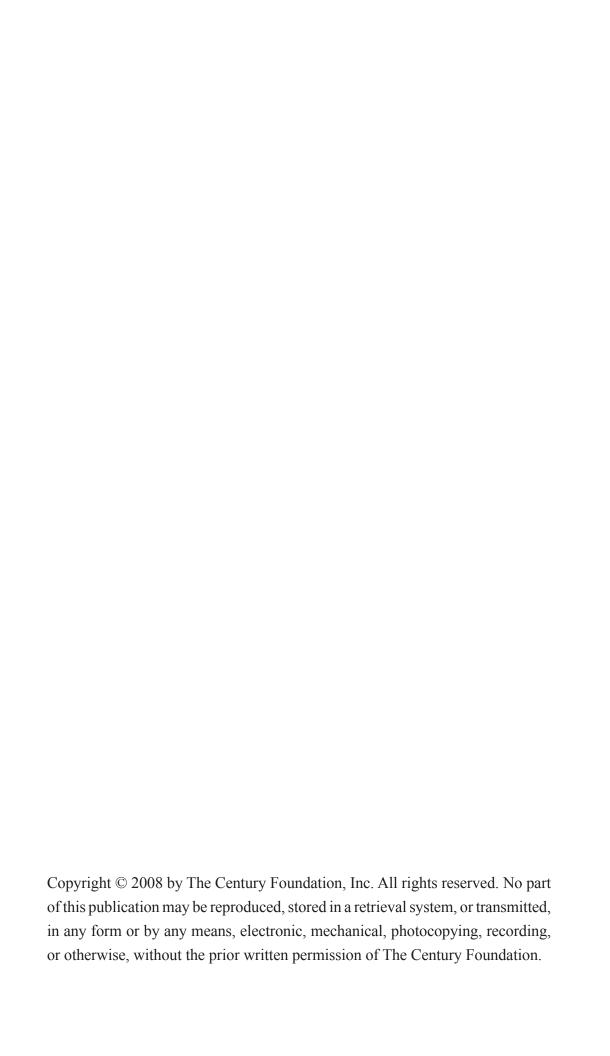# Resolving America's Islamist Dilemma:
Lessons from South and Southeast Asia

Shadi Hamid

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U.S. efforts to promote democracy in the Middle East have long been paralyzed by the "Islamist dilemma": in theory, we want democracy, but, in practice, fear that Islamist parties will be the prime beneficiaries of any political opening. The most tragic manifestation of this was the Algerian debacle of 1991 and 1992, when the United States stood silently while the staunchly secular military canceled elections after an Islamist party won a parliamentary majority. More recently, the Bush administration backed away from its "freedom agenda" after Islamists did surprisingly well in elections throughout region, including in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the Palestinian territories.

But even our fear of Islamist parties—and the resulting refusal to engage with them—has itself been inconsistent, holding true for some countries but not others. The more that a country is seen as vital to American national security interests, the less willing the United States has been to accept Islamist groups having a prominent political role there. However, in countries seen as less strategically relevant, and where less is at stake, the United States has occasionally taken a more nuanced approach. But it is precisely where more is at stake that recognizing a role for nonviolent Islamists is most important, and, here, American policy continues to fall short.

Throughout the region, the United States has actively supported autocratic regimes and given the green light for campaigns of repression against groups such as the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, the oldest and most influential political movement in the region. In March 2008, during what many observers consider to be the worst period of anti-Brotherhood repression since the 1960s, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice waived a $100 million congressionally mandated reduction of military aid to Egypt. The situation in Jordan is similar. The Bush administration and the Democratic congress have hailed the country as a "model" of Arab reform at precisely the same time that it has been devising new ways to manipulate the electoral process to limit Islamist representation, and just as it held elections plagued by widespread allegations of outright fraud

and rigging.[1] This is not a coincidence. Egypt and Jordan are the only two Arab countries that have signed peace treaties with Israel. Moreover, they are seen as crucial to U.S. efforts to counter Iran, stabilize Iraq, and combat terrorism.

The U.S. approach in Egypt and Jordan is in contrast to its policy toward political Islam in Morocco and to a lesser extent Yemen. The U.S. government, directly as well as indirectly through organizations such as the National Endowment for Democracy, National Democratic Institute, and International Republican Institute, has appeared to encourage Islamist political participation in Morocco. In May 2006, it sponsored a stateside visit by Saad Eddin el-Othmani, then the secretary-general of the Islamist Justice and Development Party (PJD). The U.S.-PJD "dialogue," while still relatively low level, is one of the few current examples of sustained American engagement with Islamist opposition parties in the Arab world.

On the whole, U.S. policy toward political Islam remains incoherent and has not been grounded in any broader strategic imperative or long-term vision. Policymakers appear wedded, or perhaps resigned, to a failing status quo. In the places where the United States can effect change the most—and in the countries most crucial to the future of the Middle East—it has chosen to take the side of secular dictators against nonviolent Islamist parties advocating for political reform. Unless we believe authoritarianism can be made permanent, this is an unsustainable course. A coherent, effective approach to democracy promotion in the Middle East is dependent on first devising a coherent strategy for dealing with Islamist parties.

POLITICAL ISLAM OUTSIDE THE ARAB WORLD

In discussing political Islam, academics and analysts tend to focus on the Arab world.[2] However, there are numerous lessons the United States can learn from the varied experience of Islamist democratic participation and governance in Turkey and South and Southeast Asia. The cases of Indonesia, Malaysia, and Pakistan, in particular, are worth exploring further as they have received only limited attention from researchers, policymakers, and democracy promotion advocates. In these countries, democracy, while flawed, is more institutionalized, and Islamist parties have already been accepted as legitimate players on the political scene. The Islamist dilemma has, in a sense, been resolved. Interestingly, these also happen to

be four countries where Islamists have held positions of executive power either on the national level (Turkey) or local and regional levels (Indonesia, Malaysia, and Pakistan).

In Turkey, the Islamist-leaning Justice and Development Party (AKP) controls the presidency and enjoys a commanding majority in parliament, with 341 out of 550 seats. It is the most moderate and democratically minded Islamist party in the Muslim world, to the extent that some question whether the "Islamist" label is even appropriate. After coming to power in 2002, the AKP has passed a series of far-reaching reforms that have moved Turkey further along the path to full democracy. The prospect of membership in the European Union (EU) played a crucial role in providing incentives for the AKP to pursue difficult but necessary reforms, including improving the penal code, easing restrictions on freedom of expression, and expanding rights for the Kurdish minority. The EU-Turkey relationship provides a promising template for engaging Islamist parties and using leverage effectively to press for democratic change.

The political context in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Pakistan is significantly different than that of both the Arab world and Turkey, so parallels should be drawn with care. However, the South and Southeast Asian experience with Islamism is worth looking at in part because it has been so different. Here, the trajectory of Islamist parties has been shaped by four main factors: a low ceiling of Islamist support, strong establishment parties, intra-Islamist competition, and normalization of Islamist political participation.

Low Ceiling of Islamist Support

In each of the three countries, Islamist parties have rarely threatened to win majorities or even pluralities. Their ceiling of electoral support hovers at around 12 percent in Pakistan, 15 percent in Malaysia, and 25 percent in Indonesia. In the most recent Pakistani national elections, for example, the United Council of Action (MMA)—a loose coalition of Islamist groups—won only 6 seats out of 342. Even the alliance's best result in 2004 gave them just 11 percent of the vote. In Malaysia, the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) won 14 percent of the vote in the 2008 elections, while in Indonesia's most recent elections, five Islamist parties split the vote between themselves with none receiving more than 8 percent.

STRONG ESTABLISHMENT PARTIES

Islamists have to compete with well-established secular parties that enjoy strong mass support and superior organization and funding. Unlike in the Arab world, where starting legal parties can be very difficult, parties from all across the ideological spectrum have been allowed to form with few restrictions. Moreover, because establishment parties must be at least somewhat responsive to an increasingly religious electorate in order to win and stay in power, they have taken some steps toward Islamization and have, in some cases, actively supported the application of Islamic law. In fact, shariah-oriented legislation has been passed in regions under the control of ostensibly secular parties such as Golkar (the largest party in Indonesia's governing coalition). This makes it more difficult for Islamist parties to distinguish themselves from the competition. The result is that Islamists have had to move further to the right in order to appeal to their conservative base, excite grassroots activism, and stay vital in a crowded political arena.

INTRA-ISLAMIST COMPETITION

A more open democratic space can also mean a proliferation of Islamist parties that compete with one another over similar constituencies. This lack of unity hurts Islamist prospects on election day. For example, Indonesia boasts three relatively large Islamist parties (the United Development Party, the Prosperous Justice Party, and the National Mandate Party), while in Pakistan, the once-powerful MMA saw the defection of original members of the founding coalition, leading to a disappointing performance in the 2008 elections. A crowded slate of Islamist parties also means that each party has an incentive to outbid the other on perceived faithfulness to Islam.

NORMALIZATION OF POLITICAL ISLAM

Political Islam is seen as a regular component of political life. Islamist groups are not exoticized or seen as the "other" as they are in Arab countries

and Turkey. They are seen not only as competitors by the ruling order, but also as potential allies. In 2003–07, President Pervez Musharraf skillfully banded with the Islamist MMA against the establishment secular parties, which he saw as the bigger threat. And in Malaysia, PAS, the country's largest opposition group, was the first Islamist party anywhere to win executive power through democratic means, when in 1959 it won regional assemblies in its traditional strongholds of Kelantan and Terengganu. Islamist leaders are routinely asked to join coalition governments and hold influential positions in various branches of government, something almost unheard of in the Arab world.

Another distinguishing feature of the Malaysian, Indonesian, and Pakistani contexts is that Islamists have managed to implement some aspects of shariah law in regions and localities where they enjoy strong support. Regional autonomy and devolution of powers has helped make this possible. In Pakistan, the MMA made some halting efforts to pass shariah laws in the Northwest Frontier Province, whose regional government they controlled for four years. In Kelantan and Terengganu, PAS has passed hudud legislation (such as cutting off the hand for stealing, whipping for alcohol consumption); banned gambling, karaoke clubs, and unisex hair salons; restricted availability of alcohol; and required female civil servants to wear the headscarf. Meanwhile in Indonesia, more than 10 percent of all regions have had some form of shariah law introduced.[3] These efforts have had a negative effect on women's rights and the protection of minorities. However, while shariah-oriented laws have been formally passed by regional assemblies and municipal councils, they have only occasionally been enforced in light of federal challenges to their constitutionality.

COMPARING ISLAMIST PARTIES ACROSS REGIONS

Many scholars of political Islam subscribe to what Jillian Schwedler terms the "inclusion-moderation hypothesis."[4] Proponents of this outlook argue that the more democracy there is in a given polity, the more Islamists—or any other group for that matter—will moderate and internalize democratic values.[5] The flip side of this is that repression and exclusion lead to radicalization. Referring to Egypt, Mona El-Ghobashy, for example, reasons that if the Muslim Brotherhood has "responded with such flexibility to the threats and

opportunities of their authoritarian environment, one can speculate how much more they would acclimate themselves to the rigors of free and open electoral politics undistorted by repression,"[6] while Vali Nasr asserts that "as was the case with Christian Democracy in Europe, it is the imperative of competition inherent in democracy that will transform the unsecular tendencies of Muslim democracy into long-term commitment to democratic values."[7]

But a comparison across regions complicates the picture. The South and Southeast Asian nations discussed above, while retaining some authoritarian features, are considerably more democratic than their Arab counterparts. However, in the three countries in question, Islamist parties tend to be more conservative (or less moderate) than most mainstream Arab Islamist groups, including Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood; Jordan's Muslim Brotherhood and its political arm, the Islamic Action Front (IAF); and Morocco's Justice and Development Party. This is reflected in the disproportionate attention paid to divisive cultural-moral issues on the part of Malaysia's PAS, Pakistan's MMA (and to a lesser extent Indonesia's main Islamist parties), and, more tellingly, on their efforts to apply restrictive shariah laws forcing women to cover up and allowing for controversial hudud legislation. In addition, Asian Islamists are not as forcefully pro-democracy as their Arab counterparts, who have, in recent years, made political reform a primary call-to-arms. This would appear to contradict the notion that more democracy leads to Islamist moderation, and, as such, presents a paradox that requires further attention.

The relative conservatism of South and Southeast Asian Islamist parties serves to highlight just how much Arab Islamists have moderated in recent years.[8] Despite intense, sustained government repression (Egypt, Syria, Tunisia) and restrictive, controlled political systems (Morocco and Jordan), the major Islamist groups have embraced the foundational components of democracy, including alternation of power (*tadowal al-sulta*) and popular sovereignty (*al-sha'ab masdar al-sultat*).[9] In the 1980s and 1990s, groups such as the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood attempted to pass legislation banning alcohol (and failed). In a brief six-month period in 1991, when it controlled six government ministries, the group caused controversy by enforcing gender segregation in offices and preventing fathers from watching their daughters play sports at school. However, in Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Tunisia, and Syria, each of the major mainstream Islamist groups has, over time, deemphasized

moral crusades and instead focused attention on expanding democratic space and protecting political rights. Compare this, for instance, with the "Islamic State Document" released by the Malaysian PAS in 2003, in which it advocates full application of Islamic law.[10] The document implies that those who fail to rule by God's law are disbelievers, explicitly supports cutting off the hands of thieves, and affirms its belief in the "absolute sovereignty" of God, which relegates man to "acting on behalf and in accordance to the dictates of the Almighty."

There are a variety of reasons for this cross-regional difference, among them that repression, in certain contexts and in conjunction with other factors, can actually spur Islamist moderation. Islamist parties in South and Southeast Asia have been allowed more space and freedom to participate in the political process. For them, raising the banner of democratic reform is not as important or pressing, since they already enjoy many of democracy's benefits, including the right to contest meaningful elections and the opportunity to govern at the local and regional levels. On the other hand, Arab governments (and, in Turkey, secularists in the military and judiciary) continue to use repression or the threat of repression to attack and undermine Islamists. Even in relatively "open" countries like Morocco, Islamist parties can criticize government policies but are not permitted to challenge the prerogatives of a powerful monarchy that continues to both reign and rule. Thus, for Islamist parties in the Arab world, the necessity and urgency of democratic reform becomes an almost existential concern. Moral issues, such as segregation of sexes and banning alcohol, are not nearly as important when the government is rounding up thousands of your members, trying them in military courts, and torturing them in prison (as is currently the case in Egypt). If the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood-in-exile began to talk about cutting off the hands of thieves, it would be utterly beside the point, since membership in the Brotherhood remains a crime punishable by death in Bashar al-Assad's Syria.

For the purposes of this paper, a more relevant reason for the relative moderation of Arab Islamists has to do with international factors. It is not an accident that the Brotherhood in Egypt formulated its most far-reaching statements on pluralism and democracy—its 2004 reform initiative and 2005 electoral program—precisely as the Bush administration was putting unprecedented pressure on the Egyptian regime, during the so-called Arab spring.

Most Arab dictatorships are funded and supported by the United States (as well as certain EU countries). Islamists are aware that gaining power within their countries will remain unlikely, if not impossible, without U.S. encouragement or, at the very least, neutrality. As long as America remains wedded to authoritarian Arab regimes, Islamists will continue to face a very difficult road, considering the extensive leverage the United States enjoys with its Middle Eastern allies. Increasingly aware of this reality, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood launched in 2006 an internal initiative titled "Re-Introducing the Brotherhood to the West," in which it listed misconceptions on both sides and suggested steps to address them.[11] Since then, the Brotherhood has started an official English-language Web site (www.ikhwanweb.com), published numerous op-eds in Western publications, and established informal links with American officials, researchers, and representatives of NGOs. In contrast, the issue of engaging with Americans is not as important in the Malaysian, Indonesian, and Pakistani contexts, since the United States has limited influence to shape internal political processes in these countries, and since Islamists there are already accepted as legitimate political players.

Furthermore, in the face of continued restrictions and repression, Islamist groups in the Arab world cannot afford to be isolated. They have recognized that progress on democratization requires broad cross-ideological coalitions. This has led them to devote more efforts to forming coalitions with secular and liberal groups, as well as reaching out to women, intellectuals, and Christians. Such efforts have required them to reassure skeptical audiences that they have no intent of imposing Islamic law (hence the Muslim Brotherhood Deputy General Guide Khairat al-Shater's article in the *Guardian* titled "No Need to Be Afraid of Us"[12]). As a result, instituting hudud laws, forcing women to cover their hair, and banning alcohol are now off the table and are expressly not part of the platforms of most Islamist groups in the region.

This is not to say that Islamists are paragons of liberalism, or that Americans—or the international community at large—will be comfortable with their views on social issues. On women's and minority rights, some of their positions remain deeply objectionable to Arab liberals and Western observers alike. However, it is important to keep in mind that Islamists are popular, in part, because they give voice to the growing social and religious conservatism of their societies. At the same time, Islamist groups are pragmatic. When the

Moroccan and Kuwaiti governments granted women increased rights, Islamists were initially opposed, but either reversed their position under pressure (as the PJD did in response to the mudawanat reforms in Morocco) or accepted the change and adapted accordingly (as Kuwait's Islamic Constitutional Movement did when women were given the right to vote).

When policymakers worry about the rise of Islamists, they have other things in mind besides commitment to democracy, personal freedoms, and women's rights. Particularly in countries that have peace treaties with Israel, the possibility that Islamist parties might suspend diplomatic ties or put the treaties to public referenda is cause for concern, and rightly so. This is one area where Arab Islamists have not visibly moderated. However, as of late, there have been some positive signs that forward-looking Islamists are willing to reach out to the Jewish community and entertain the prospect of rapprochement with Israel. Of course, this is not a position they want to highlight since it would alienate their rank-and-file supporters as well as deprive them of one of their trump cards against "pro-Israel" Arab dictatorships. Even so, some Islamist leaders, including the Brotherhood's Abdel Menem abul Futouh, have gone on the record with me, as well as other researchers, regarding their willingness to accept a two-state solution and come to terms with Israel as a nation-state.[13] Recently, there was the unprecedented development of two prominent Brotherhood members, Essam El Erian and Ibrahim El Houdaiby, penning op-eds in *Forward*.[14] Even as an organization, the Muslim Brotherhood, in its 2004 reform initiative, affirms its "respect of international laws and treaties,"[15] which is the code Islamists often use for indicating they will accept Camp David without actually saying they will accept it.

Israel, of course, cannot afford to believe in the best of Islamist intentions. And it would be a mistake to skirt over the fact that many Islamists evince what can only be described as hatred toward Israel. (Anti-Israel sentiment, however, is also a feature of the secular and leftist opposition. For example, Kifaya, the secular pro-democracy group, advocatess an end to Egypt's peace treaty with Israel). The United States and its allies can preempt the risks of Islamist over-reach on this issue by making support for Islamist political participation contingent on moderating their position on Israel. Even if this turns out to be unfeasible, providing clear incentives for coexistence with Israel may be enough. A potential model for this type of "enmeshing" is, again, Turkey's AKP, which

in its earlier incarnations was staunchly anti-Israel, but now enjoys a working relationship—and extensive military ties—with Israel.

Toward a New U.S. Policy on Political Islam

The context for reassessing American policy toward political Islam in the Arab world is more encouraging than is usually thought. In contrast to the state of affairs in South and Southeast Asia, the United States enjoys two main advantages vis-à-vis formulating a coherent Islamist policy: (1) Islamist parties in the Arab world are relatively moderate and open to engagement with the West; and (2) the United States has substantial leverage with which to influence and shape events in strategically vital Arab countries. Egypt, for instance, is the world's second largest recipient of American foreign aid, while Jordan is the second-largest per capita recipient. If we do not have leverage in such circumstances, it is unclear where we would. The United States is not powerless. It must actively use the various policy tools at its disposal to end the political stalemate in what remains the most autocratic region in the world. Drawing from the experiences of South and Southeast Asia as well as Turkey, what follows are some suggestions for resolving our Islamist dilemma.

The E.U.-Turkish Model Provides a Way Forward

The United States, along with invested European partners, can establish a set of clear political benchmarks that Arab allies will have to meet in order to receive benefits—such as increased access to American and European markets, membership in regional and international trade bodies, debt relief, and greater investment opportunities. Benchmarks should include conditions on the political inclusion of all groups that meet two standards—a commitment to nonviolence and playing by the rules of the democratic game—which most mainstream Islamist parties already easily meet. Arab regimes, which remain highly unpopular among their own people, are dependent on us for political and military support. We should not hesitate to tie this support to explicit requirements.

RECOGNIZING THAT WE HAVE LEVERAGE, AND USING IT

There is not much the United States can do to influence Islamist groups that have already been successfully incorporated in the political process (Indonesia, Malaysia). Nor is there much it can do to shape the political evolution of countries that are already democratic (Turkey). However, the United States—for the time being at least—does have cards to play in the Arab world. It should not let its substantial leverage with Arab regimes—or Islamist parties themselves—go to waste. Using this leverage with still-evolving Islamist groups before they come to power, rather than afterward, when it is too late, is a far better approach. Taking action now will increase our ability to hold them to their democratic commitments, to ensure that they do not cross red lines on issues like shariah law, minority rights, and women's equality.

ESTABLISHING A U.S.-ISLAMIST DIALOGUE

As a starting point, our next president should state as a matter of policy that the United States is not opposed to engaging nonviolent Islamist parties and has no problem as such with Islamists assuming power through free elections. This, by itself, would signal a newfound seriousness about political change in the region. Using our leverage effectively will necessitate a "dialogue" with Islamist groups to address contentious issues, learn more about their positions, and identify common interests and shared objectives. Due to sensitivities with existing regimes, this would require flexibility on the part of the United States, using intermediaries and back channels. As trust develops, there can be a more focused, structured discussion about how each side can help the other. Policymakers would seek to secure private guarantees from rising Islamist parties. For example, Islamists in Egypt and Jordan would have to pledge that they would not cancel their countries' peace treaties with Israel should they come to power. In return, the United States would pressure the regimes in question to accept Islamist groups as full participants in the democratic process.

It should be noted that Islamists may be hesitant to engage directly with the United States at first, because of their bitterness toward the Bush administration. Any progress, therefore, will be contingent on a new administration

taking bold steps to repair our credibility—as well as showing Islamists we are ready to embrace a new policy of engagement and backing up that rhetoric with specific steps and gestures. At various points, Islamists, particularly reformists within the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, have directly called on the United States to help it in its struggle with the government.[16]

Influencing Internal Struggles from Within

In recent years, three of the most important Islamist groups in the region, Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, Jordan's Islamic Action Front (IAF), and Morocco's PJD, have become increasingly racked by internal divisions between conservatives and reformers, or, as they are called in Jordan, "hawks" and "doves." While problematic, this is evidence of political maturation and a willingness to confront controversial issues about the future of Arab Islamism that risk splitting the movement. The United States and its European allies have a vital interest in seeing moderates emerge on top. If we do not act soon, there will be consequences.

A debilitating rift in the ranks of Jordan's Islamic movement was resolved recently, but in a way that portends the dangers to come. In light of a devastating electoral loss in November 2007 where IAF "doves" (*hama'im*) presided over the party's worst result in history (winning 6 out of 110 seats), "hawks" (*suqoor*) launched an aggressive effort to take the reins from the mostly moderate leadership. They succeeded. In internal elections in May 2008, Hammam Said, a prominent pro-Hamas hardliner, won the post of overseer-general of the Muslim Brotherhood, the organization's top position. Meanwhile, in light of its disappointing performance in last September's elections, the PJD elected a new secretary-general, Abdelilah Benkirane, known as a staunch social conservative. Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood is heading down a similar path, as the regime of President Hosni Mubarak has arrested the some of the group's most moderate leaders, leaving open a power vacuum that conservatives have been more than eager to fill.

In short, these organizations are still generally committed to a moderate course, but this may be changing, and much of it has to do with Arab government policies that have alienated moderates and encouraged radicals,

sometimes by design and sometimes by accident. Islamist groups have committed themselves to working within existing systems and avoiding confrontation with the government. However, in return, they have been repaid with unprecedented repression (Egypt), unprecedented vote rigging (Jordan), and a complete unwillingness to give up any power (the Moroccan monarchy). The lesson an increasing number of Islamists are learning is that participation and moderation do not seem to pay off. As Tayseer Fityani, a former IAF member of parliament, told me recently, the 2007 elections "were a terrible blow for the moderates in the opposition. . . . After that, they had no standing to say anything about moderation. [People were saying] 'you took the path of moderation, and then the government stepped on you.'"[17]

Indeed, if anything, the more Islamist groups moderate, the more regimes seem to restrict their participation or repress them. The United States, through its economic and political leverage, has a role to play in working with its Arab allies to ensure this trend toward Islamist radicalization does not continue. As a first step, allies like Egypt must stop promoting policies that appear expressly designed to encourage radicalism among the opposition. The thinking on the part of these regimes is that the more confrontational or conservative Islamists seem to be, the more they can justify repressive practices to their Western patrons, who are already nervous about the rise of anti-American extremists.

At the same time, broader regional tensions—such as the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah war—make the political climate for moderates that much more challenging. Any targeted policy of Islamist engagement must therefore be coupled with policy changes that help address Arab grievances and depolarize the region, including redoubling our efforts on the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. Such measures would give Islamist moderates the political cover they need to make their case to rank-and-file supporters that things are, indeed, changing for the better and that recourse to open confrontation and radicalism is not necessary.

FACILITATING CROSS-IDEOLOGICAL COOPERATION

Successful democratic transitions in Latin America and Eastern Europe were facilitated by broad-based opposition coalitions that were able to unite

behind inclusive pro-democracy platforms. Transitions in the Arab world will continue to be difficult so long as Islamist groups represent the only real opposition, and their secular counterparts remain weak. Islamist dominance only compounds the fears of Arab regimes and Western policymakers of opening the political system too quickly. The experience of South and Southeast Asia suggests that Islamist participation is easier to accept and "normalize" so long as viable non-Islamist alternatives exist. With this in mind, the U.S. government should devote more funding and support to programs and initiatives that bring members of the Islamist and secularist opposition together. Taking this idea a step further, America and its allies can promote Islamist participation in the context of an overarching framework—for example, a national charter—that would ensure that the concerns and interests of secular parties are given due consideration. Such a charter would clearly outline the rules of the game and guarantee freedom of religion, freedom of expression, and equal rights for women and minorities. There are precedents for this worth reexamining. In 1995, during the U.S.-supported Sant'Egidio talks in Rome, Algerian parties from across the ideological spectrum agreed on a national platform as the basis of a new political process.

INFLUENCING THE END GAME

What will the future democracies of the Arab world look like? The details matter, and it is worth emphasizing that seemingly minor decisions can have lasting effects. Factors such as federalism, type of electoral system (proportional representation versus first pass the post), the strength of secular parties, and intra-Islamist competition all affect the course Islamist parties take.

Let us consider a specific illustration of how institutional design affects opposition behavior. Suppose an Islamist party wins a 30 percent plurality in presidential elections and then secures victory in a run-off. An Islamist president, empowered by a constitution that grants the head of state substantial executive authority, bypasses parliament, and uses decree powers and national referenda to appeal to voters directly. In such a situation, the nature of the constitution and the choice of a presidential system make undemocratic behavior more likely. On the other hand, in a proportional-representation parliamentary

system, an Islamist party that won only 30 percent of the vote would be forced to establish a coalition with secular and liberal parties (and even former ruling parties) in order to form a government. Under those circumstances, it would be difficult for Islamists to govern with an aggressive, ideological agenda. If they did, the coalition would likely collapse.

Thus, all other things being equal, the variable of institutional choice can produce widely divergent political outcomes. These decisions, made early on in the democratization process, are particularly important considering the extent of ideological division and the relative weakness of the opposition in the Arab world. The United States and its European allies will be in a position, during the transition phase, to influence the end game on these important concerns.

Looking Forward

If we wish to reconcile American interests and ideals, a reassessment of U.S. policy toward political Islam is both urgent and necessary. It should be stating the obvious, but democracy without the participation of the largest, most influential opposition groups in the region is not democracy. Fortunately, since the September 11 terrorist attacks, there has been a growing realization among liberals and conservatives alike that the status quo in the Middle East has produced a toxic mix of religious extremism and political violence. Our adversaries, including Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran, are ascendant in part because they enjoy some degree of popular support. On the other hand, our so-called moderate allies, including Egypt, Jordan, and the Gulf countries, are paper tigers, weak and largely illegitimate in the eyes of their citizens. These countries also happen to repress their people, sometimes brutally. We are seen as complicit in part because we are.

In the search for friends and allies that give voice to popular aspirations, moderate Islamist groups present problems but also possibilities. Some might think that engaging with Islamists is neither wise nor realistic. However, for the reasons I have laid out—assuming there is sufficient political will and commitment—the twin goals of supporting Islamist political participation and supporting Middle East democracy are more within reach than we usually think.

NOTES

1. See "Commending the people and the Government of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan for their continued committment to holding elections and broadening political participation, and for other purposes," H. Res. 575, 110th Congress, Library of Congress, Thomas, July 2007, available online at http://thomas.loc.gov/.

2. Attention is also paid to Iran, Sudan, and Afghanistan, but usually to make the point that Islamists in power are dangerous. These cases, however, are largely irrelevant to the discussion of Islamist groups participating in the democratic process, since, in the three countries, Islamists came to power through revolutionary means. Revolutionary parties tend to be authoritarian and violent, regardless of ideological orientation. Arab Islamists themselves understand this difference. In my conversations with Islamist leaders in Egypt and Jordan, I have rarely heard Iran, Sudan, and Afghanistan mentioned in any context, and certainly not as models to be emulated. The Iranian case is interesting in its own right, but since Islamists there are Shiite, mainstream Sunni Islamists see them as being outside the scope of political Islam as they understand it.

3. Elwin Tobing, "Syari'ah-ization of Indonesia," The Indonesian Institute, August 24, 2007.

4. Jillian Schwedler, *Faith in Moderation: Islamist Parties in Jordan and Yemen* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 2.

5. For variations of this argument, see James Piscatori, *Islam, Islamists, and the Electoral Principle* (Netherlands: Leiden ISIM, 2000); Mona el-Ghobashy, "The Metamorphosis of the Egyptian Muslim Brothers," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 37 (August 2005): 373–95; Vali Nasr, "The Rise of Muslim Democracy," *Journal of Democracy* 16 (April 2005): 13–27; and Carrie Rosefsky Wickham, *Mobilizing Islam: Religion, Activism and Political Change in Egypt* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

6. El-Ghobashy, "The Metamorphosis of the Egyptian Muslim Brothers," August 2005, p. 391.

7. Nasr, "The Rise of Muslim Democracy," p. 15.

8. For more on how Islamist parties have moderated in recent years, see Shadi Hamid, "Parting the Veil," *Democracy: A Journal of Ideas*, Summer 2007, pp. 38–47, available online at http://www.democracyjournal.org/pdf/5/Hamid.pdf; Robert Leiken and Steven Brooke, "The Moderate Muslim Brotherhood," *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2007, pp. 107–21, available online at http://www.nixoncenter.org/publications/LeikenBrookeMB.pdf; and Marc Lynch, "The Brotherhood's Dilemma," Crown Center for Middle East Studies, Brandeis University, January 2008, available online at http://www.brandeis.edu/globalbrandeis/documents/MEB25. pdf.

9. See for example *Mubadira al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun houl Mabadi' al-Islah fi Misr* (The Initiative of the Muslim Brotherhood regarding Principles of Reform in Egypt), March 2004; and *Na'am wa ila al-abad al-Islam hoa al-hal: Al-Barnamaj al-Intakhabi li-Murashi Hizb al-Jabha al-'Amal al-Islami*, 2003–2007 (Yes and Forever, Islam Is the Solution: The Election Program of the Islamic Action Front Candidates), IAF Parliamentary Office, October 2003.

10. Pan Malaysian Islamic Party, "The Islamic State Document," November 2003, available online at http://www.wluml.org/english/news/pas-islamic-state-2003.pdf.

11. "Re-Introducing the Brotherhood to the West," Internal Muslim Brotherhood Document.

12. Khairat al-Shater, "No Need to Be Afraid of Us," *Guardian*, November 23, 2005, available online at http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2005/nov/23/comment.mainsection.

13. Hamid, "Parting the Veil," p. 47.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

SHADI HAMID is director of research at the Project on Middle East Democracy and a Hewlett Fellow at Stanford University's Center for Democracy, Development and the Rule of Law. This past year, he was a research fellow at the American Center for Oriental Research in Amman, Jordan, where he conducted research on the evolving relationship between the Islamic Action Front and the Jordanian regime. His articles have appeared in the *Washington Post,* the *Christian Science Monitor,* the *Jerusalem Post,* the *New Republic,* the *American Prospect, Democracy: A Journal of Ideas*, and many other publications. He writes for the National Security Network's foreign affairs blog, *Democracy Arsenal,* and is a fellow at the Truman National Security Project. Previously, he served as a program specialist on public diplomacy at the State Department and a legislative fellow at the Office of Senator Dianne Feinstein. During 2004–05, he was a Fulbright Fellow in Jordan, researching Islamist participation in the democratic process. A Marshall Scholar, Hamid is completing his doctoral degree in politics at Oxford University, writing his dissertation on Islamist political behavior in Egypt, Jordan, and Morocco. He received his B.S. and M.A. from Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service.

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