

# Policy Brief

## S U M M A R Y

Before any significant political reform can take place in the Arab world, the United States and Europe need to begin engaging moderate Islamists, an action less thorny than it might seem because Islamists have embraced democratic procedures and have shown a strong commitment to the rule of law. For a long time Arab regimes have frightened the United States and Europe into supporting regimes' repressive measures toward Islamist movements by invoking the nightmare of anti-Western fanatics taking power through the ballot box. However, today's moderate Islamists—while illiberal in many important respects—no longer match the nightmare. Excluding them from the political sphere weakens the chances of democratic reform and increases the likelihood that eventually they will resort to violence.

## The Key to Arab Reform: Moderate Islamists

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**I**t is both desirable and feasible for the West to reach out to Islamist movements in the Arab world now that there are signs that some of these groups embrace nonviolence, pragmatism, and democratic procedures. Those who still insist that there is no such thing as a “moderate Islamist” miss the reality that activist organizations in Morocco, Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, and Yemen have evolved after decades of failed opposition to repressive regimes. Instead of clinging to fantasies of theocratic states, Islamist movements in these countries now see the wisdom of competing peacefully for shares of political power and working within existing institutions to promote gradual democratic openings.

U.S. and European officials understandably worry that Islamists might jettison democratic transition if and when they gain significant power. While understandable, these fears ignore the diversity of the Islamist spectrum. More importantly, policy makers must recognize the more immediate point that democracy cannot come to Arab societies without the participation of movements that command huge popular support. Rather than resisting Islamists, Western governments should develop policies to positively engage the moderates among them.

### Mapping the Islamist Spectrum

Contemporary Islamist political movements in the Arab world share three major characteristics:

- Islamists are critical of prevailing societal conditions in Arab countries, which they describe interchangeably as decadent, underdeveloped, or unjust;
- They blame authoritarian ruling elites for these societal conditions and therefore consider political change as the first crucial step toward altering Arab reality. Religious political movements in Arabic countries differ from missionary groups and Islamic charitable organizations, which see change as a long-term process of Islamizing societies that takes place outside of the realm of politics; and finally
- They legitimize their practices and create popular appeal for their movements by basing them in religious norms and values, which serve as the ultimate ideological frame of reference for society and politics.

Within the broad category of Islamist political movements, groups can be differentiated by their attitudes toward violence and their perceptions of politics. Militant groups such as the Egyptian Jihad and the Algerian Jamia Islamiyya use violence and seek to establish theocratic states as the sole means of



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changing conditions in Arab societies. Their sources of inspiration are either idealized interpretations of past moments in Islamic history or contemporary models of Islamic republics, be they in Iran, Sudan, or even in Afghanistan.

Moderate Islamists reject violence and endorse competition through pluralistic politics, and it is they with whom Western governments now should engage. The leaders of the Moroccan Justice and Development Party, Saad Eddin Al Uthmani, and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, Muhammad Mahdi Akef, best articulate the moderate Islamist position. They exclude radical strategies as options for political transformation and see gradual democratic openings as the only viable way to challenge repressive authoritarian regimes in the Arab world of the future.

This position is relatively new. In the 1980s and 1990s moderate movements still had not accepted the value of democratic governance. Caught in the iron grip of state oppression and continuous radicalization at the outer edges of the Islamist spectrum, these movements were either forced out of the official political sphere (Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood) or violently banned and denied any public role (Tunisia's Al Nahda Party). In Morocco and Jordan, where Islamists were partly integrated in the political process, Islamists' preoccupation with rhetorically sound though politically unattainable goals—such as the implementation of Islamic law and the Islamization of educational systems—did not help them overcome general doubts about their real objectives. Instead, their doctrinal purity reinforced the generally negative perceptions of Islamists as traditionalists who were little interested in tolerating the diversity of Arab societies or accommodating political pluralism in any serious way.

The Algerian civil war and the Islamist insurgency in Egypt, both of which erupted in the first half of the 1990s, affirmed this image of the "Islamist threat" and ultimately blurred the distinction between radical and moderate movements and violent and nonviolent strategies. By the end of the 1990s,

Arab Islamists had failed to change political realities in their homelands despite considerable popular support. This failure prompted various revisionist trends that gathered momentum in the aftermath of September 11, 2001. As a result, moderate movements have become increasingly receptive to democratic procedures.

Although moderate Islamists continue to call for the establishment of Islamic states across the region, this is increasingly a matter of symbolic language and traditional metaphor. In real politics these ideals are subordinated to the priorities of liberal democratic reforms. A new consensus has emerged within movements such as the Jordanian Islamic Action Front (IAF), the Yemeni Reformist Union, and the Egyptian—not yet legalized—Center Party (Al Wasat) that the ideals reflected in the utopia of the Islamic state can best be realized in the contemporary Arab world by adhering in each country to the principles of democracy, the rule of law, and human rights.

The meaning of democracy and rule of law within the moderate Islamist spectrum does not differ much from secular Arab views. Universal citizenship, peaceful transfer of power, checks and balances, citizens' participation, neutrality of public authorities in approaching multiple religious and ethnic identities, and tolerance of diversity are principles that are as accepted among moderate Islamists as they are in liberal circles. Certainly, Islamists will never use the adjective "secular" to describe the neutrality of public institutions, but they convey identical connotations when they assert the "civility" of the public sphere. Nor should Islamists be expected to drop their rhetorical emphasis that the teachings of Islam should guide all action, because this emphasis maintains the distinctiveness of religion-based political perceptions and sustains to a great extent the popular appeal of the Islamists.

The embrace of pluralist politics does not mean that moderate Islamists are giving up their religious legacy and becoming wholeheartedly the new liberals of the Arab world.

Rather, the crucial issue is that promoting democratic reform and pragmatism are becoming additional central components of the Islamist agenda. Recent rallies of Islamists in Rabat, Cairo, and Amman as well as public opinion surveys indicate that Islamists' constituencies are inclined to support this shift.

Furthermore, the new pragmatism of moderate Islamist movements creates an atmosphere of relative openness toward U.S. and European policies in the Arab world and an initial willingness to engage Western countries less ideologically. This change gives the United States and Europe the potential opportunity to reach out to Islamists in the Arab world and develop strategic ties. The possibility of Islamists becoming key players in countries like Morocco, Egypt, Jordan, and Yemen, amid processes of substantial political transformation and through the ballot box, cannot be ruled out.

Any effort to deal objectively with moderate Islamists in the Arab world cannot avoid highlighting the less liberal zones in their

positions and practices. Issues such as gender equality, civil and political rights of non-Muslim population groups, religious freedom, and modernization of educational systems have been highlighted as examples of the illiberalism of Islamist views. Although there has been some progress in relation to the status of women and non-Muslims in a number of movements, especially in Morocco and Egypt, the majority of moderate Islamists continue to hold discriminatory illiberal views on key sociocultural issues.

These attitudes should not be ignored, nor should the absence of perfection be the enemy of the good. Democratic opening within the Islamist spectrum will be a long and uneven process. A key step in this process is Islamists' inclusion in the political sphere in a way that confronts them with the real challenges of managing contemporary societies and gives them space to experiment in public with a range of moderate views on sociocultural issues. Exclusion and repression never lead to sustainable momentum for an

### **Morocco—Justice and Development Party**

"The establishment and strengthening of democracy in Moroccan political life depends on the existence of democratic political parties which have clear visions and programs capable of enhancing the people's representation in all public institutions."

—Justice and Development Party in Morocco

### **Egypt—Muslim Brotherhood**

"The Muslim Nation (*umma*) adopts Consultation (*shura*) in all its matters and decisions. There is no place for dictatorship or the monopoly of authority by one individual. Freedom is the gift of Allah to His people; hence the Umma must take pride in freedom, defend it and ensure all people enjoy it."

—One guiding principle of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt

### **Jordan—Islamic Action Front**

"To strengthen national unity, to promote the consultative democratic process, and to defend freedom, human dignity, and human rights."

—One guiding principle of the Islamic Action Front in Jordan

embrace of liberal trends; exclusion and repression instead push those who are forced to be voiceless to uncompromisingly reassert their distinct identity or to resort to violence.

### Moderate Islamists in Opposition Alliances

Authoritarian regimes such as those that rule in the Arab world never reform voluntarily. They have to be pushed by indigenous actors that enjoy the sustainable support of large shares of the population. Oppositions that lack wide support cannot prevail because ruling elites can easily outmaneuver them. Without the formation of far-reaching opposition alliances, autocrats ruling from Morocco to Bahrain will outlast Western pressures by either inventing a “theater of democratization” based on cosmetic reforms or discrediting U.S. and European calls for democracy as foreign aggression against the national sovereignty of Arab countries. The mobilization of popular domestic opposition is necessary to achieve the political reform that the United States and others now see as necessary for humanitarian reasons and to stem the sources of terrorism.

### Hamas and Hizbollah

Hamas and Hizbollah present moderate Islamists with an interesting contrast. Although they are most notorious for their militant resistance, these movements also have active political branches. Both Hamas and Hizbollah have shown willingness to adhere to the rules of the political game in their respective national contexts. Hizbollah has been fielding candidates for the Lebanese parliament since 1992. Hamas participated in the Palestinian municipal elections held early in 2005, which resulted in a clear victory for the movement in Gaza and considerable representation in the West Bank. This eagerness to be part of the political process should not be mistaken, however, for an espousal of democratic procedures. Unlike moderate Islamists, these groups have not sworn off violence and have not agreed to abide by the rule of law.

It would be nice if liberal democrats among the Arab intelligentsia could be the vanguard of political reform, but they are too few and too disconnected from their bodies politic to compel resistant autocrats to open the way for representative government. There are good reasons for the United States and Europe to support liberal parties and secular nongovernmental organizations across the region. Normatively and politically, Arab liberals have embraced the Western political value system of universal citizenship, democracy, and rule of law. Their objectives are identical with Western aspirations for tolerant, pluralist Arab societies. They speak a language that U.S. and European policy and intellectual communities understand and admire. Unfortunately, though, while Arab liberals are celebrities in the West, they are marginal back home. Arab liberal actors are incapable of reaching out to considerable constituencies in their home societies or to force political change. With ruling elites determined to preserve their power and liberal democrats too weak to wrest power away, the only way for the United States and Europe to promote democracy in the region is by working with more representative forces on the Arab political scene.

Moderate Islamists are well rooted in the social and cultural fabric of Arab countries. It is precisely because Islamists are popular that ruling regimes seek to repress or contain them. In Morocco, where the Justice and Development Party (PJD) is legal and enjoys parliamentary representation, the government constantly attempts to limit its political participation. Before the most recent legislative elections in September 2003, the PJD was forced to reduce the number of its candidates and submit to the dictates of the Ministry of Interior regarding which electoral districts it could contest. In October 2004, King Muhammad VI announced new legislative proposals covering political parties. This bill, which the Moroccan parliament is currently debating, would ban religious references in party platforms and expand the power of the executive to dissolve political parties. The bill

is primarily designed to curb the popular PJD and minimize its political influence.

The current relationship between the Jordanian government and the Islamic Action Front (IAF) is similar. In the legislative elections of June 2003, Islamist politicians, facing various governmental restrictions, won about 15 percent of the seats, down from 20 percent in 1993 and 27 percent in 1989. Since September 2004, Jordanian authorities have arrested several members of the IAF on unspecified charges of threatening national security. Most recently, a new draft law barring Islamist-dominated professional associations from engaging in politics was approved by the Jordanian cabinet on March 6, 2005.

Even as Morocco and Jordan put authoritarian pressure on legal, moderate Islamist movements, these two states as well as Kuwait

on the road to democratization. Although the regime has since ignored the Muslim Brotherhood's initiative, its significant impact has been to position Egypt's Islamists within the emerging reform consensus and among liberal opposition movements and to help bridge the Islamist-secular divide as a prerequisite for forging broad alliances for democracy. Analogous developments can be seen in Jordan and Yemen.

Arab regimes have long invoked the nightmare of anti-Western fanatics taking power through the ballot box to frighten the United States and Europe into implicitly supporting these regimes' repressive measures toward Islamist movements. Ben Ali, Mubarak, and other autocrats still play this game to minimize Western pressures on their regimes. However, Arab politics has changed a great deal since the

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and Yemen are positive exceptions in the degree to which they allow Islamists to participate. In Tunisia, President Ben Ali banned the Islamist Awakening Party (Al Nahda) in the first half of the 1990s and forced its leading figures into European exile. In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood remains excluded from the political sphere and regularly faces repression by the regime of President Hosni Mubarak. Islamist-led initiatives to establish political parties are normally blocked in Egypt's government-controlled Political Parties Affairs Committee.

Despite continued containment and exclusion during the past few years, moderate Islamists have not questioned their strategic choice of gradual political reform. On the contrary, they have launched different reform initiatives to increase momentum for change in the Arab world. On March 3, 2004, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood announced its reform plan, which called on the government to rescind the emergency law and other restrictions on political activity and embark

beginning of the 1990s. At present, excluding nonviolent Islamists from the political sphere only serves to weaken the chances of democratic transformation in the region.

Arab liberals recognize this reality and, in the past few years, have been gradually reaching out to moderate Islamists and engaging them in reform campaigns. Secular-religious national alliances for democracy are instrumental in contesting authoritarian state power and articulating popular consensus over the need for political transformation. Islamists, on their side, have seized the integration opportunity and positioned themselves at the heart of growing opposition movements across the region. In Morocco, Lebanon, and Egypt, differences between liberals and Islamists remain relevant, but the degree of convergence of liberals and Islamists over national priorities is systematically growing. These are steps in the right direction. Democratic opposition platforms are by far more effective with Islamist participation than without it.

### Engaging Moderate Islamists

The United States and Europe should move forward together in the direction of engaging moderate Islamists. Inviting Islamist politicians to conferences in Europe and convincing U.S. diplomats in the Arab world to set up regular consultations with moderate Islamist movements, while steps in the right direction, are not enough. Without reducing support to Arab liberal parties and secular nongovernmental organizations, U.S. and European policy makers should undertake three initiatives:

- Press Arab governments to ease their repressive measures against moderate

ment, and local capacity building. Leaving aside the explosive terrain of national and regional politics and adopting low-profile strategies that prioritize joint local initiatives are crucial first steps toward collaborating with Islamists.

- Sponsor training and awareness programs for members of political parties in countries such as Morocco and Jordan, where moderate Islamists have organized legal political parties and enjoy a degree of legislative representation in national or local councils. Such sponsorship can foster pragmatism and moderation. Enhancing parliamentary performance, campaigning for elections, consulting on the

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Islamists and to grant Islamists access to the political sphere. Condemning individual arrests of liberal figures while completely ignoring arrests of Islamists does not foster the credibility of the United States and Europe among Arab populations.

- Engage democratic Islamist movements at the grassroots level in the less politicized fields of civic education, women's empower-

legalities of human rights and civil liberties, and promoting the role of female politicians are all ideas that are likely to be welcomed by at least some Islamist parties.

To be sure, devising appropriate strategies to engage Islamists is not an easy task. Friendly rulers in Morocco, Egypt, and Jordan are likely to be critical of any contacts between Western governments and move-

### Different Branches of Islamism

It is essential to distinguish between Sunni and Shiite Islamist movements. Sunni Islamism can be broken down into three main currents:

- **MISSIONARY:** Religious missions of conversion, such as Tablighi and Salafiyya movements.
- **MODERATE:** Nonviolent movements and parties, such as the Muslim Brotherhood and its offshoots across the Middle East and North Africa, the Umma party in Kuwait, the Justice and Development Party (PJD) in Morocco, and the Islamic Action Front (IAF) in Jordan, which operate within constitutional and political frameworks and increasingly advocate gradual democratic reforms.
- **MILITANT:** The Islamic armed struggle, which includes the global terror network Al Qaeda and local movements such as Al Jammaa Al Islamiyya in Egypt and Al Jihad groups in various Arab countries.

Shiite Islamism is far less fragmented than Sunni Islamism. Shiite Islamist movements generally operate within the respective nation-state, striving to secure political representation and protect social interests of the Shiite community.

ments they classify as either too dangerous or illegal. U.S. and European policy makers and diplomats find it unavoidably problematic to collaborate on democratic reforms with representatives of movements that do not share their stances on issues as crucial as the future of Iraq and the peace process in the Middle East. The United States and Europe thus must be cautious and gradual in seeking to integrate Islamists.

Islamists are most likely to adopt a comparable approach. Some Islamist movements are eager to develop ties to the United States and Europe because of their importance in the Arab world; other Islamists are primarily

regional, and international levels must be complemented on the Islamist side by unquestioning acceptance of the ideals of democracy and rule of law as guidelines for political action.

Democratic opening across the Islamist spectrum needs to be promoted and pushed forward via further engagement. Continuous debate about the degree of moderate Islamists' commitment to democracy and the real intentions behind Islamists' new inclinations (best summarized by the catchy phrase "one man, one vote, one time"), are misguided to a large extent. Such debates are ideological residuals of past decades and ought to be

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interested in capacity-building programs to enhance their own political performance. In neither case should the current Islamist willingness to reach out to the West be taken to mean trust. Doubts about U.S. and European objectives in the Arab world remain deep across the Islamist spectrum.

Engaging Islamists at the grass roots should be understood as a results-oriented experiment in which Western governments assess the impacts of their new policy on their partners within an initial period of two years. Initiatives should be limited only to movements and organizations that clearly renounce violence and are willing to cooperate with the West. Depending on concrete results and trends across the Islamist spectrum, policy makers may consider commencing a second phase of national-level cooperation projects with selected democratic Islamist movements.

Western governments contemplating cooperation with Islamist parties beyond the grassroots level should apply demanding standards. Renouncing violence at national,

revisited in light of recent developments.

Without the active participation of moderate Islamists, calls for political transformation in the Arab world are bound to remain whispers among tiny communities, irrelevant for the larger social fabric, and harmless to authoritarian regimes. Initiating and managing the first reform steps is the prerogative of ruling autocrats. The degree of their commitment to democratic change will depend on the existence of large, popular, homegrown, opposition alliances—not outside pressure. To this end the contribution of moderate Islamists is indispensable and overdue.

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