



THE SABAN CENTER  
*for* MIDDLE EAST POLICY  
*at* THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

WORKING PAPER

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Number 4, March 2010

# THE MYTH OF EXCLUDING MODERATE ISLAMISTS IN THE ARAB WORLD

KHALIL AL-ANANI



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KHALIL AL-ANANI

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The United States has long shown confusion in its policies toward Islamist political movements in the Middle East. By conflating moderates and hardliners, and believing that moderate Islamists pose a threat to U.S. strategic interests in the region, the United States has opted to support regimes that limit democratic participation. American administrations have backed, with limited exceptions during the presidency of George W. Bush, authoritarian regimes that not only impose restrictions on, and enact regulations against, political participation, but use intimidation and violence against Islamist groups and parties.

In reviewing this current state of affairs, and examining the effects of excluding Islamists from the political arena, it becomes clear that the policies have numerous negative repercussions, particularly relating to U.S. national security interests. The historical experience in the Arab world indicates that despotism produces extremism. Ultimately, political repression increases citizens' feelings of exclusion and diminishes preferences for moderation and peaceful political participation. Today, from Saudi Arabia to Morocco, there is a clear rise in extremist Salafi movements of various types, some of which are the result of regimes' exclusionary policies.

The United States should therefore consider policies that promote engagement with moderate Islamist groups in the Middle East. This paper defines moderation as the extent to which Islamist groups

accept peaceful political participation, do not rely on militias, and accept the values of democracy. Many groups fulfill these requirements, including the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Jordan, Algeria, and Yemen, as well as the Moroccan Justice and Development Party (PJD).

The United States has long resisted engaging with moderate Islamists because of several unfounded beliefs. Key among these is that allowing moderate Islamists to enter the political arena would undermine stability in the region. But a principal reason for unrest and instability in the Middle East is the failed economic and social policies of the autocratic governments in power. In a number of countries, such as Egypt, Yemen, Jordan, Morocco, and Algeria, collective anger and discontent is the result of poor economic and social conditions produced by "stable" regimes. Many in the United States also believe in the fallacy that moderate Islamists will use democratic participation as an entryway to take over the state. History has shown otherwise. Indeed, many shakeups in the region, particularly in Iran in 1979, Sudan in 1989, and Afghanistan in the 1990s, were not the result of Islamists gaining power through the ballot box. In addition, numerous cases have shown—particularly in Morocco, Algeria, Yemen, and Jordan—that when moderate Islamist parties do participate in the political system, they tend to become more pragmatic and moderate in their political discourse and policies.

There are benefits for the United States in engaging with moderate Islamists. Islamists have a wider appeal across the Arab and Islamic world than radicals, and are well positioned to challenge Islamic extremism. In addition, dialogue with Islamists would bolster public opinion of the United States within several countries where religion is part of the fabric of the political arena. The United States should aim for face-to-face dialogue with moderate Islamist parties by promoting the following policies:

- **Rethink the Basic Understanding of Moderate Islamists.** The first step for the United States is to reassess past approaches and begin to see moderate Islamists not as threats but as possible partners. In order to do this, the United States must understand how moderate Islamists think, and what their expectations are of the United States.
- **Understand the Internal Dynamics of Islamist Movements.** The United States should understand the nature of the internal conflicts and divisions within moderate Islamist organizations, particularly ongoing disputes between conservatives and reformers, as well as the relative influence of each wing.
- **Do Not Treat Democracy Promotion Solely as a Response to Terrorism.** The United States should not link the spread of democracy in the Arab world with the war on terrorism. Any American policy that views democracy primarily as an instrument of U.S. national security is destined to fail since it will only reinforce Arab perceptions of American hypocrisy; Arabs have the right to political freedom and democracy like the rest of the free world, regardless of any single nation's security concerns.
- **Capitalize on the New Generation of Moderate Islamists.** The United States should invest in building strong relationships with younger Islamists who will become future leaders of their movements. This generation's activists differ from their predecessors in their more pragmatic orientation; their ideological openness to liberal democratic values, such as freedom, pluralism, equality, accountability, and transparency; and their willingness to engage with the West.

## THE AUTHOR

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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I spent four months at the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution, and am grateful to the many people without whose support and help, this paper would not have come out. I would like to thank Martin Indyk, Kenneth Pollack, Tamara Cofman Wittes, Andrew Masloski, Yinnie Tse, and Ariel Kastner. I am also deeply thankful to Todd G. Patkin for his generosity.

This paper was made possible in part by a grant from the Tom Lantos Foundation for Human Rights and Justice.

# INTRODUCTION: THE NEW MAP OF ISLAMISTS

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The map of Islamist movements in the Arab world has changed over the course of the past three decades. There are wide gaps between those movements that use violence, look to change political regimes by force, and seek confrontation with the West, such as al-Qa'ida, and those movements that seek to practice politics peacefully, have respect for the sovereignty of the state, and are willing to work with the reigning political regimes. These latter, moderate groups share a belief in coexistence with the West.

Since the September 11, 2001 attacks, American confusion over moderate Islamist groups has caused U.S. policymakers to accuse them of bearing at least some responsibility for the existence of extremist movements in the Middle East. Moreover, because official American discourse conflates moderates and radicals, and sees even moderates as serious threats to U.S. strategic interests in the region, the United States has accepted or ignored Arab regimes' repression of Islamist movements. The danger is that the exclusion of moderate groups from the political arena may cause them, and their constituents, to radicalize. As Francois Burgat has written, "State violence creates the violence of the Islamists."<sup>1</sup>

The current situation in the Arab world presents the following dilemmas: Can Arab regimes, with the backing of the United States, successfully

exclude moderate Islamists from the political scene? What are the risks of doing so? What are the effects of exclusion on the interests and image of the United States in the region? Given these questions, how then should the United States deal with moderate Islamists? This paper analyzes the dangers posed by excluding all moderate Islamists from the political arena, and recommends measures by which the United States can engage moderate Islamist parties in order to advance both its democratic principles and national security interests.

## THE MEANING OF MODERATION

As "moderation" is a relative term, one should exercise caution when using it. Those beliefs and actions that the United States perceives as moderate may seem extreme to others, whereas those that Islamist movements see as moderate may seem extreme to Washington and Arab regimes. Thus, to avoid a semantic debate, this paper defines moderation in the framework of the social and political context in which it is used. Specifically, it considers the concept of Islamist moderation as being the extent to which movements accept peaceful political participation, do not rely on militias, and accept the values of democracy and its various components, such as freedom, tolerance, and equality, irrespective of religion, ethnicity, or gender.

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<sup>1</sup> Francois Burgat, *Face to Face With Political Islam*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 77.



With this framework in mind, one can classify many Islamist groups as moderate. The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Jordan, Algeria, and Yemen believe in the validity of political participation as a path toward peaceful integration. They respect the rules of the political game and have decided to act within the constitutional framework of their states. The Moroccan Justice and Development Party (PJD) goes further by having a somewhat progressive religious and political agenda. All these Islamist movements believe in pluralism, civic engagement, and the rule of law. However, it should be noted that they differ amongst themselves in the degree to which they accept democratic values, depending on the degree of political contestation permitted in their countries. For example, Egypt's legal ban on the Muslim Brotherhood, in effect since 1954, has hampered the group's ability to develop a progressive platform that accepts robust democratic values, such as full freedom and equality, as the political platform of the PJD in Morocco does.

The level of moderation of Islamist groups is strongly associated with the political, cultural, and religious climates in which they exist. The more open the climate, the more flexible the Islamists become, and the more willing they are to accept democratic values. Thus, while groups like the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Jordan, and Kuwait, participate peacefully in politics, other movements in relatively more open political climates also hold a more progressive and democratic political platform, as is the case in Morocco, Turkey, and Indonesia. These examples indicate that the extent to which Islamist groups moderate is tied to the degree to which the regimes respect democratic values and allow political groups and parties, including liberals, leftists, and Islamists, to participate in politics.

## THE SALAFI CATALYST

However imperfect moderate Islamist groups may seem to the West, they are preferable to a new player on the scene—with decidedly hard-line views toward

pluralism and democracy—which is trying to dominate Arab societies. From Saudi Arabia in the east to Morocco in the west there has been a clear rise in support for Salafi movements of various types, including traditional, jihadist, and political.

The traditional Salafi movement believes in a strict, conservative reading of religious texts and does not tolerate any process of religious renewal. Salafi religious rhetoric has become more widespread in recent years, as it is increasingly disseminated throughout society, particularly through the Arab media. Similarly, social and educational activities take place within associations that are tied to groups, specifically charity organizations, affiliated with the Salafi movement. As such, Salafi discourse currently dominates much of the social and public spheres in the Arab world.

Major differences in rhetoric and strategy have emerged between Salafi movements and moderate Islamists. While the latter believe in democracy, the Salafists consider it a human invention (*bida'a*) which contradicts Islamic law (*Shari'a*). Therefore, they do not believe that women have the same rights as men or that religious minorities have the same rights as Muslims in Muslim-majority communities. Also, Salafi discourse offers a culturally narrow message, viewing the world through dichotomies of “the faithful and the infidel” and “good and evil,” thereby building barriers between Salafists and the rest of society.

While many see the Salafi framework as having negative implications for non-Muslims, the framework also has a strong, and often negative, impact on the Salafists themselves. It encourages political apathy and provides a metaphysical interpretation of the economic and social hardships under which a majority of Arabs suffer. Salafi rhetoric is devoted to engaging people in meeting the needs of the afterlife, instead of being invested in daily issues and problems. Thus, believers develop a mentality in which they consider their problems as something

to tolerate until they pass away, rather than something to solve.

Jihadist Salafism, as a movement, has two important elements: a belief in the immutable, uncompromising nature of Islam and a mobile organization that seeks to use violence to advance its agenda. Because Arab regimes have suppressed moderate Islamist groups, many young people have channeled their interests into joining Salafi alternatives. Jihadist Salafi groups, such as al-Qa'ida, maintain an ideology of “believer versus infidel” and use violence against local and international actors. While U.S. military campaigns against al-Qa'ida in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as domestic security campaigns across the Arab world, may reduce the number of these groups, the circumstances that produce these groups remain. Therefore, the difficult social and economic conditions in Arab countries constitute incubators for reviving Jihadist Salafi trends.

The last—and most insidious—of the Salafi groups are the political Salafists, who constitute a new movement growing in strength in the Arab world. Political Salafism is a combination of two components: an ultra-conservative understanding of Islamic texts and a rigid political ideology that followers believe should be imposed on society.

Unlike moderate Islamism, political Salafism is bereft of any flexibility or desire to change the content of its political and religious message, and instead focuses on the application of Islamic law. Moreover, like other Salafists, political Salafists view the West, and particularly the United States, as a dangerous enemy, rather than potential partner. Because they believe that the United States is a threat to Muslim identity, they feel they must confront it.

Since Salafists compete with moderate Islamists for public support, they have been developing strategies for attracting new audiences in order to exercise hegemony over the Arab street. Instead of using traditional means of gaining support, such as proselytizing at mosques or homes, they take advantage of the tools of modern technology, which allow them, especially younger members, to connect with potential recruits electronically through chat rooms, blogs, and Facebook. However, perhaps ironically, despite the innovative approach to spreading their message, they refuse to innovate when it comes to the content of their ideas. They believe the time for the “Salafi era” has come, and that they must use all the tools available to them to influence Arab societies. Given the frustration dominating the Arab street, Salafi groups have grown increasingly confident of their impending success.

## EXCLUSIONARY POLICIES: WHO STOPPED THE “TSUNAMI”?

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Between 2004 and 2005, many Arab countries experienced what Mona Yacoubian refers to as an “Islamist Tsunami”—a rise of moderate Islamists in the civil and political arenas.<sup>2</sup> While initially heartened by the “Arab spring,” U.S. policymakers soon soured and began reconsidering the Bush administration’s “Freedom Agenda.” At the same time, the “Tsunami” ended, and in a number of countries, particularly Jordan, Egypt, Yemen, Kuwait, Algeria, and Morocco, the influence of moderate Islamists began to recede. Three main factors lay behind the decline of moderate Islamists: the United States’ backtracking on its support of Arab democracy; the harsh suppression that Arab regimes employed against the Islamist opposition; and the growing influence of Salafists.

The Bush administration’s policies during 2004 and 2005, which pushed for political change in Arab societies, increased moderate Islamists’ optimism in the possibility of becoming full participants in the political process after being excluded for decades. In June 2005, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice made the administration’s commitment to democracy promotion clear when she said, “For sixty years, my country, the United States, pursued stability at the expense of democracy in this region here in the Middle East, and we achieved neither. Now we are

taking a different course. We are supporting the democratic aspirations of all people.”<sup>3</sup> She called for free and fair elections in Egypt, and the Muslim Brotherhood benefited from the pressure, participating (as independents) in the parliamentary elections held at the end of 2005, and winning an unprecedented twenty percent of seats. Less than two months later, Hamas emerged victorious in the January 2006 Palestinian legislative elections, much to Washington’s surprise and disappointment. This was a turning point in the American effort to spread democracy in the region. Because the Bush administration did not appear to respect the outcome of the Palestinian elections, moderate Islamists began to question the level of tangible American support for political reform in their countries.

The second factor in the decline of moderate Islamists has been the harsh techniques Arab regimes have used to suppress them. The regimes have benefited from both the United States’ silence in the face of the regimes’ efforts to restrict and repress the opposition, and its overall reluctance to change the authoritarian landscape of the region. The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, for example, has faced a difficult environment after its sudden ascent in the 2005 elections. The regime feared that the Brotherhood would become the inevitable alternative to

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<sup>2</sup> Mona Yacoubian, “Democracy and Islamist Parties: The Arab Experience,” Aspen Institute, June 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Remarks by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice at the American University in Cairo, Egypt, June 20, 2005.

the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP). As a result, it has made full use of legal and illegal means to pressure the group. The regime's reaction to the Brotherhood was part of a plan to stifle all forms of political opposition that emerged in 2004 and 2005, and correct the state of imbalance exposed by its weak electoral performance. The Egyptian authorities applied a comprehensive strategy of punishing the Muslim Brotherhood, through economic, political, and even constitutional means. Specifically, the regime attempted to stop the social and religious activities of the Brotherhood by arresting dozens of Brotherhood leaders in various Egyptian governorates. The authoritarian pressure hit its peak in February 2007, when forty Brotherhood leaders were sent to military court. In April 2008, twenty five were sentenced to prison, with terms ranging from three to ten years.<sup>4</sup> More recently, the regime has moved against the senior leadership of the Brotherhood, targeting moderates and reformists, most notably two members of the Guidance Bureau, Abdel Monem Abu el-Futouh and Osama Nasr.<sup>5</sup> The government charged and imprisoned them after they attempted to collect money for Palestinians without legal permission.

The regime has hampered the Brotherhood's political future by amending thirty-four clauses of the Egyptian Constitution. The most important of these is Article 5, which prohibits any political activity on religious grounds or with a religious reference (*marji'iyya*). This is ironic given that Article 2 of the Constitution states that the principles of Islamic law are the primary source of legislation. Similarly, the modification of Article 88 undermines the ability of the judiciary to monitor parliamentary elections, and will therefore help the

regime prevent opposition candidates, mainly from the Brotherhood, from running.

While the suppression of the Egyptian Brotherhood was justified because it is considered an illegal group, the Brotherhood in Jordan has faced obstacles despite the fact that it enjoys state legitimacy and has a legal political party, the Islamic Action Front (IAF). The Jordanian regime has retained the "one-person, one-vote" law, enacted in 1993, that many consider unfair because it weakens large political parties through a single non-transferable vote system (SNTV).<sup>6</sup> The law also enabled widespread gerrymandering, which the government used to its advantage against the IAF. As a result, the party suffered a loss of six seats in the 1993 elections and, coupled with unprecedented government interference, won only six seats, the IAF's lowest total ever, in the November 2007 elections, down from seventeen held since 2003.<sup>7</sup> The Brotherhood has also faced challenges outside the political arena. The regime has targeted the social and philanthropic activities of the group by dissolving the board of directors of the Islamic Center Society (ICS), a Brotherhood affiliate that runs hospitals, clinics, schools, and a wide array of other social institutions. All this has reduced the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood within Jordanian society.

In Morocco, both security and political restrictions have hampered Islamists. The Justice and Development Party failed to increase substantially its share of seats in the September 2007 parliamentary elections, contrary to the expectations of surveys conducted by the International Republican Institute (IRI) and the National Democratic Institute (NDI). The PJD won just forty-six seats out of a

<sup>4</sup> Among those arrested were Khairat el-Shatir, the Brotherhood's deputy, and Hassan Malik, a businessman in the Brotherhood, who both received a sentence of seven years, and Mohammed Ali Bishr, a Guidance Bureau member, who received a sentence of three years.

<sup>5</sup> The Guidance Bureau of the Muslim Brotherhood is the highest executive office in the movement. It consists of sixteen members who are elected through the Shura Council of the movement.

<sup>6</sup> Previously, voters could cast a number of votes corresponding with the number of seats in their district.

<sup>7</sup> Several months before the 2007 parliamentary elections, the IAF withdrew from municipal elections, claiming the government was allowing military personnel to vote repeatedly in the elections.

total of 325, adding only four seats to what it had garnered five years earlier in the 2002 elections.

The PJD suffered heavily from a security campaign waged against Islamists of all stripes after the terrorist attacks that shook Casablanca in May 2003.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the PJD, as well other large parties, was hampered by the kingdom's complex electoral system that effectively prevents any single party from securing an absolute majority. As Michael McFaul and Tamara Cofman Wittes explain, "The seat allocations are made through a complicated 'remainder system' run by local magistrates who determine the 'threshold number' needed to win a seat in a particular district. After the top vote-getting parties have been allocated one seat each, the threshold number is subtracted from their vote totals, and the rest of the seats are allocated to parties according to their remaining vote totals, in descending order."<sup>9</sup> Under this system, there is little chance for a party to win more than one seat in a given district, even under the best scenario. (This, in addition to the practice of vote-buying and the inability of the Islamist and secular opposition to form an electoral coalition, explains the low voter turnout of under thirty-seven percent.)

The third and final factor in the decline of moderate Islamists is the growing challenge of Salafism, which threatens to siphon supporters from the Brotherhood and other mainstream groups. The most prominent example of this took place in Kuwait's 2008 parliamentary elections, where Salafi candidates achieved an unexpected victory over the

Islamic Constitution Movement (Hadas), winning seventeen out of fifty seats and becoming the largest bloc in the Kuwaiti National Assembly. Hadas, whose roots lie in the Kuwaiti branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, had entered the election with six seats, then the largest parliamentary bloc, but saw its numbers cut in half after the balloting. The Salafists benefited from new electoral legislation—which, ironically, Hadas had helped design—that divided the country into five electoral districts (down from twenty five). In addition, the Salafists capitalized on an ineffective Hadas political machine, tribal alliances in several districts, and allegations of corruption against incumbent Hadas members.<sup>10</sup> Following the election, the first demand the Salafi representatives made was to apply Shari'a through a committee to monitor "unethical" behaviors, and they insisted on creating a moral police similar to the one in Saudi Arabia.<sup>11</sup>

In Yemen, political Salafists have sought to create a political party to compete with the main opposition movement, the moderate Islamist Yemeni Congregation for Reform (Islah) party, for the parliamentary elections scheduled to take place in 2011. Two of the largest Salafi associations—the Virtue and the Wisdom—have joined forces as one political movement and are working to establish a political party to be headed by Shaykh Abdul Majid al-Zindani, President of Al Iman University, whom Washington has placed on its Specially Designated Global Terrorist list.<sup>12</sup> In addition, Yemeni conservative leaders created the so-called Vice and Virtue Committee in order to impose religious supervision

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<sup>8</sup> On May 16, 2003, five coordinated explosions, detonated by a group of suicide bombers, went off within thirty minutes of each other in Casablanca, killing over forty people. See Keith B. Richburg, "Moroccans Lose Sense of Security; Death Toll Rises to 41 in Five Suicide Blasts," *Washington Post*, May 18, 2003.

<sup>9</sup> Michael McFaul and Tamara Cofman Wittes, "The Limits of Limited Reforms," *Journal of Democracy* 19, no. 1 (2008), pp. 19-33.

<sup>10</sup> For a detailed analysis of Kuwait's 2008 parliamentary elections, see Nathan J. Brown, "A Setback for Democratic Islamism?" *Kuwait Times*, May 30, 2008.

<sup>11</sup> Jassim al-Qams, Bashar al-Sayegh, Eid al-Rmizan, and Fayez al-Twalah, *Aljarida* (Kuwait; in Arabic), June 5, 2008, available at <<http://www.aljarida.com/aljarida/Article.aspx?id=63817>>.

<sup>12</sup> Abdul-Salam Mohammed, "Zindani, A Candidate for the Salafi Party's Leadership in Yemen," IslamOnline (in Arabic), May 2, 2007, available at <[http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?c=ArticleA\\_C&cid=1177156195156&pagename=Zone-Arabic-News%2FNWALayout](http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?c=ArticleA_C&cid=1177156195156&pagename=Zone-Arabic-News%2FNWALayout)>; "United States Designates bin Laden Loyalist," U.S. Department of the Treasury, February 24, 2004, available at <<http://www.ustreas.gov/press/releases/js1190.htm>>.

on society.<sup>13</sup> The Yemeni regime is looking to attract Salafis to counter-balance the moderate Islamist opposition movement.

## THE INDUSTRY OF EXTREMISM

The exclusion of moderate Islamists from the political process is the goal of the Arab authoritarian regimes. The relevant question for U.S. policymakers is: What is the result of this exclusion? Of greatest significance to the United States is that the rank-and-file of moderate Islamist groups may grow increasingly frustrated over their exclusion from the political process and radicalize as a result. The historical experience in the Arab world has shown that despotism produces extremism, and exclusion pushes some down the path of extremism. Ultimately, political repression convinces moderate Islamists that political participation is useless. In addition, because the price of participation is high—intimidation, arrests, and prosecutions—some conclude it is simply not worth the risk.

In Egypt during the 1950s and 1960s, the regime of President Gamal Abdel Nasser imprisoned, tortured, and executed Muslim Brotherhood leaders, putting into motion a process of radicalization which led young Islamists to leave the Brotherhood to look for violent alternatives. In the past few years, the Mubarak regime has continued the policies of Nasser, launching a sustained crackdown against Islamists. Hundreds of Muslim Brotherhood members have been arrested without clear charges. The regime has shut down Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated businesses in an attempt to cripple the organization financially.

The regime's strategy of repressing the Brotherhood undermined the influence of reformists and tilted the scale in favor of conservatives. The influence of

Mahmoud Ezzat, deputy general guide of the Brotherhood, Mohamed Morsi, the head of the Political Bureau, and Mahmoud Hussein, secretary-general of the Brotherhood—all conservatives—grew at the expense of reformists, such as Abu el-Futouh, Esam al Erian, a member of the political committee, and Gamal Heshmat, Ibrahim al-Zafarani, and Khaled Hamza. In 2007-8, the regime arrested and then tried in military court a number of the Brotherhood's first-line leaders. Adding insult to injury, the court handed down harsh sentences against a number of Brotherhood pragmatists, such as Khairat el-Shater, the group's third-in-command, and Ayman Abdul Ghani, the manager of student activities. In addition to further alienating Muslim Brotherhood members, these measures removed the most modernizing and progressive voices within the group's organizational structure. Not surprisingly, when the Brotherhood held internal elections recently, it chose conservatives, who lacked any reformist credentials or broad progressive agendas, to fill all sixteen seats of the Guidance Bureau.

The impact of the regime's actions can be seen in the January 2010 internal Muslim Brotherhood elections. The Brotherhood elected a new General Guide, Mohammed Badie, who hails from the conservative faction of the organization. To many observers, the election capped the long struggle between conservatives and reformists within the Brotherhood, and Badie's victory signified that conservatives had succeeded in taking control of the group (not surprisingly, many reformers questioned the fairness and transparency of the vote). With the conservative faction victorious, observers believe the movement will no longer devote energy to participating in politics but will rather focus on religious and educational activities. It is likely that political activity will be devoted to defining the group's position on social issues in a regressive manner; specifically, the group is unlikely to adopt a position that calls for

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<sup>13</sup> Jalal Sharabi, "Yemen establishes the Virtue Committee," *Al Arabiya* (in Arabic), July 15, 2008, available at <<http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2008/07/15/53126.html>>.



equality among Egyptian regardless of religion or gender. Ultimately, the exclusion of reformists within the Brotherhood will disappoint and frustrate younger members of the group, and may ultimately lead to their defection.<sup>14</sup>

Similarly, in Jordan, hardliners in the Islamic Action Front effectively staged a coup within the party, grabbing the reins of leadership from moderates after suffering historic losses in the 2007 parliamentary elections, for which the party's reformist wing was held responsible. The conservatives, led by Zaki Bani Irsheid, the Secretary General of the IAF and close associate of Hamas, seized the opportunity to control the party by insisting that pragmatists like Ruheil Gharaibeh, Abdul Latif Arabiyat, and Jamil Abu Bakr bore responsibility for the electoral loss. They disbanded the group's Shura Council and asked the council members to tender their resignations. New elections took place wherein the conservatives won a majority of the fifty seats in the council.

In 2008, the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood also elected a new chairman, Hammam Saeed, a hardliner with staunch conservative views, compared to his predecessor, Salem Falahat, who lost by one vote in the group's internal elections. Thus the important question is why the members of the Muslim Brotherhood were split between the conservative Hammam Saeed and the reformist Salem Falahat, and ultimately elected the former? One answer is that many Brotherhood members felt an acute sense of injustice on account of intensifying state repression against the group. Their choice should be understood as a turn toward the "hawkish" strategy of confronting the regime, and away from the "dovish" strategy of political participation.

Morocco also witnessed frustration on the part of moderates. After the 2007 Moroccan parliamentary elections, Abdelilah Benkirane, secretary general of the Justice and Development Party, said in an interview with the IslamOnline website that he saw no advantage in political participation and that it was necessary to withdraw party members from parliament to protest the state's lack of respect for democracy.<sup>15</sup>

In Algeria, the results of excluding moderate Islamists were more deadly. The Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), a legal, nonviolent party, made significant gains in the municipal and legislative elections of 1990 and 1991, but was forcefully repressed by the leadership of the National Liberation Front (FLN), which led to the beginning of a bloody civil war. As a result, the FIS disintegrated and some young members took arms against the regime under the name of the Armed Islamic Group (GIA), which transformed into the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) that joined al-Qa'ida, calling themselves "al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb."<sup>16</sup> The exclusion of the FIS from the political scene in the early 1990s started an escalating cycle of violence that continues to this day.

## DEPOLITICIZING ARAB SOCIETIES

What the above cases have in common is that the ultimate victims of the regime's harsh measures are the moderates. Arab regimes have made political participation very costly, and Islamists are paying a high price for taking part in the political process. By placing restrictions on entry into the political arena and by suppressing moderates, the government may cause many Arab youth to think seriously about joining Salafi movements instead. It is well known that

<sup>14</sup> AbdelRahman AyYash, "National and State Inceptions of the Islamic Movement," Al-Ghareeb (in Arabic), posted January 31, 2010, available at <<http://al-ghareeb.blogspot.com/>>.

<sup>15</sup> Ahmad Hammouche, "Leader of Moroccan Justice and Development Criticizes 'State's Fools,'" IslamOnline (in Arabic), April 14, 2008, available at <[http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?c=ArticleA\\_C&cid=1203759011085&pagename=Zone-Arabic-News/NWALayout](http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?c=ArticleA_C&cid=1203759011085&pagename=Zone-Arabic-News/NWALayout)>.

<sup>16</sup> Boualem Ghamrassa, "The Largest Armed Group in Algeria Pledges Allegiance to bin Laden...and al-Zawahiri threatens France," Asharqal-Awsat (in Arabic), September 15, 2006, available at <<http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&issueno=10153&article=382892&feature=>>>.

the traditional Salafists ban political participation, and yet agitate for change in public matters. This more dogmatic approach may suit well the younger generation that is politically disaffected, but still has strong feelings about the issues affecting their communities.

In some ways, this entire process is a vicious cycle in which the people of the Arab world (and American interests) suffer, while the authoritarian regimes and the Salafists benefit. Since most Salafi movements do not participate in the electoral process, they do not pose a threat to the regimes—at least in the short term—as moderate Islamists would. Therefore, authoritarian regimes in Egypt, Yemen,

and Jordan have sought to use the Salafi movement to attack those Islamists who participate in politics. Currently, the Mubarak regime is giving space to Salafists to exert control over the religious and social scene; however, this tactic of strengthening Salafists to weaken the Muslim Brotherhood is clearly fraught with risk over the long term.

Ultimately, the democratization process itself is another victim of the exclusionary practices of Arab regimes, which prevent any opportunity for alternative political voices to mature. Moreover, the insistence on exclusion may lead to a reduction in tolerance within society and an increase in social, sectarian, and religious tensions.



## MYTHS USED TO JUSTIFY EXCLUDING MODERATE ISLAMISTS

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As the American expression goes, “Don’t judge a book by its cover.” However, there are some American politicians and observers who judge movements of moderate Islamists by the cover of their more hard-line counterparts. In reality, there remains no convincing or adequate reason for American policy to support the removal of moderate Islamists from the political arena. While some American officials argue that there are risks in the inclusion of moderate Islamists, the results of excluding them, in fact, are more costly for the United States. Unfortunately, Washington has turned away from democracy promotion in the Middle East since 2006, and is playing a part in excluding moderate Islamists from the political scene.

Historically, the incorporation of moderate Islamists in the political arena has typically led to their further moderation. For example, the cases of Morocco, Yemen, Algeria, and Kuwait, discussed below, all demonstrate this. But the flip side is also relevant—excluding moderate Islamists comes at a cost. In the clearest example of this, the bloodshed that took place in Algeria during the 1990s, as mentioned earlier, was in reaction to the suppression and exclusion of moderate Islamists from the political arena. Therefore the question is not only whether inclusion leads to moderation, but also what exclusion ultimately leads to.

There are many American misconceptions regarding the differences between moderate and hard-line

Islamists. A large sector of politicians and academics also share a set of prejudices that must be shed in order to develop a more accurate view of the Islamist spectrum. The following are the major myths prevalent in Western discourse.

### THE MYTH OF “ONE-MAN, ONE-VOTE, ONE-TIME”

Many Western observers fear that once Islamists gain power they will never relinquish it. They believe that the victorious Islamists will change the rules of the game to remain in power and will impose Shari’a law, thereby putting an end to democracy. This argument is largely based on three historical cases: Iran in 1979, Sudan in 1989, and Afghanistan under the rule of the Taliban during the second half of the 1990s. The fact that shatters the argument is that in all of the above cases, Islamists did not gain power through democratic means. In Iran, the mullahs gained power through the Iranian Revolution. In Sudan, military generals under the leadership of Omar al-Bashir, the current president, in cooperation with Hassan al-Turabi, leader of the National Islamic Front, staged a military coup to form an Islamist government. In Afghanistan, the Taliban gained control through a civil war and announced the creation of an Islamic emirate in 1996. The resulting extremism in each country is not surprising. According to Graham Fuller, “Accession to power through force, by any group or party, invariably creates an

authoritarian structure and legacy of violence that impedes evolution toward moderation and rule of law.”<sup>17</sup>

Similarly, the secular regimes in the Arab world that gained power over the last half century, either through military coup or fraudulent elections, have changed the rules of the game to remain in power until death or inheritance, as in the cases of Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Yemen, and Syria. Thus, the “one-man, one-vote, one-time” hypothesis has not been tested in any democratic setting, but rather under despotic or revolutionary conditions. It should therefore not be generalized when engaging with the issue of Islamists. On the flip side, there are cases of moderate Islamists ceding power, such as in Jordan when the Muslim Brotherhood dissolved its executive office in reaction to the movement’s poor performance in the November 2007 parliamentary elections.

### THE MYTH OF INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION

Some Western analysts believe that integrating Islamists into the political arena will not cause them to become more moderate or to accept more vigorously the rules and values of democracy. Steven Cook, for example, has claimed that it is dangerous to assume Islamist moderates would become more moderate if they came to power.<sup>18</sup> However, in examining various Arab experiences, the error of this concern is evident. Historical examples have demonstrated that moderate Islamists who are integrated in the political system deepen their moderation and develop a pragmatic political vision.

In Morocco, after King Mohammed VI came to power in 1999, the government implemented a gradual process of political liberalization that

appeared to contribute to the moderation of the Justice and Development Party in its rhetoric and policies. The party has remained committed to respecting and adhering to the democratic rules of the system, and undertaking democratic governance within the organization itself.

In Algeria, the Muslim Brotherhood-linked Movement of Society for Peace (MSP) has gone so far as to participate in governing coalitions. The party gained close to fifteen percent of the vote in the 1997 parliamentary elections—becoming the second largest party in parliament—and joined the governing coalition. In the 2002 and 2007 parliamentary elections, it received seven percent and nine percent of the vote, respectively, but remained committed to being a coalition partner and supporter of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika (rather than looking to advance its own presidential candidate). This reflects the party’s ability to mold its ideology and accept governing partnerships with an ostensibly secular regime.

In Yemen, moderate Islamists shared power and led parliament in 1993 under Shaykh Abdullah al-Ahmar, the head of the Islah Party and Speaker of parliament. The party played an important role in preserving Yemeni unity in 1994 after some movements threatened to rebel and secede. Thus, the Islamist party not only proved its compliance with political norms but played an important role in furthering the stability of the country. In Jordan, the Islamic Action Front has been the largest parliamentary bloc for several sessions, in addition to holding five ministerial portfolios in the Jordanian cabinet in 1991. Moreover, in 1994 the Brotherhood did not reject the peace agreement between Jordan and Israel because there was a positive relationship between the Brotherhood and the Jordanian regime,

<sup>17</sup> Graham E. Fuller, *The Future of Political Islam*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 97.

<sup>18</sup> Steven A. Cook, “The Myth of Moderate Islam,” *Foreign Policy* Web Exclusive, June 2008, available at <[http://www.foreignpolicy.com/story/cms.php?story\\_id=4334](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/story/cms.php?story_id=4334)>.

proving that moderate Islamists can employ pragmatism and political realism.<sup>19</sup>

In each of these cases the Islamists did not seek power through coups or conflict. Rather, they showed considerable responsibility toward their constituencies and respected the rules of the game. Problems only began to emerge when authoritarian regimes sought to exclude them from the political arena.

The most important benefit of incorporating moderate Islamists into the political process is that it spurs internal discourse within the movements, which in turn serves to strengthen reformists and weaken conservative and hard-line elements. For example, in August 2007, the reformists in the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood were given important powers to design a political party platform for the first time in the group's eighty-year history. Although the platform advances some regressive ideas, particularly toward women and Christians (like rejecting their right to run for the presidency), the movement had the courage to formally declare its political vision in public. However, after the regime used security fears to exert more pressure on the group, the power of reformists diminished and conservatives regained the upper hand.

## THE MYTH OF STABILITY INSTEAD OF DEMOCRACY

Some U.S. policymakers and scholars have argued that stability in the Middle East cannot be achieved without supporting authoritarian regimes. This framework dictates that political alternatives to the existing regimes should be restricted as they may cause instability. Accordingly, even moderate Islamists, who vie for political representation, are considered a threat to stability and American interests in the region.

This argument, however, is not supported by the available evidence. During the 1980s and 1990s, Egypt and Algeria, respectively, experienced tremendous internal turmoil—outright civil war in Algeria's case—because they were determined to exclude moderate Islamists. In addition, the attacks of 9/11 demonstrated that American support for Arab authoritarian regimes had fueled widespread anti-Americanism and pushed many Muslim youth to side with Osama bin Laden. For instance, Mohamed Atta, the ringleader of the attackers, was born and raised in Egypt, but was not the product of any Islamist political party, or even a mainstream movement like the Muslim Brotherhood. Instead, Atta joined al-Qa'ida.

Therefore, Islamist participation in politics does not seem to cause instability in the Arab world. Rather, a key reason for unrest in the Middle East is failed economic policies. In a number of countries, such as Egypt, Yemen, Jordan, Morocco, and Algeria, poor social and economic conditions—including high rates of corruption and rising unemployment—have provoked collective grumbling and discontent, and in some cases, riots, as was the case in Egypt in 2007 and 2008. The demographic factor—a surge in the percentage of young people in countries like Egypt—has exacerbated the economic situation. The instability and radicalism that emerges as a result, therefore, is not the product of Islamist groups, but rather the failed policies of the regime.

In addition, political violence and instability exist because of separatist and rebel movements in some nations, such as Yemen, Sudan, Somalia, and Algeria. Such movements survive and thrive mainly as a result of internal discord, including economic, social, and demographic problems, as well as religious and ethnic tensions. This, and the economic situation described above in countries like Egypt, suggests

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<sup>19</sup> The Brotherhood did oppose the peace treaty with Israel, but did so within political parameters. See Mohammad Suliman Abu Rumman, *The Muslim Brotherhood in the 2007 Jordanian Parliamentary Elections: A Passing "Political Setback" or Diminished Popularity?* (Amman: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2007), p. 24, available at <<http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/amman/05320/05320-eng.pdf>>.

that if stability exists at present, it is deceptive and fragile and may explode at any moment.

### THE MYTH OF PROMOTING DEMOCRACY VERSUS EMPOWERING ISLAMISTS

Many American observers and officials believe that supporting democracy in the Middle East will directly empower Islamists. This may appear true, but only by default. Authoritarianism in the Arab world has squelched any opportunity for the creation of liberal or secular parties or movements to compete with Islamists. The Islamists are attractive for many because they are the only option, apart from corrupt and despotic ruling parties.

Accordingly, some might argue that moderate Islamists would take power in any free and fair election. However, it is likely that a gradual and continued liberalization of the political sphere would not play in favor of Islamist parties, as several examples illustrate. The Justice and Development Party in Morocco did not win a majority of seats in the September 2007 parliamentary elections, despite the expectations of American organizations, which conducted surveys of the Moroccan electorate.

Instead, the party took second place after the Independence Party, a secular, leftist party.

In Egypt, the parliamentary elections of 2005 saw voters cast ballots in favor of independent candidates not affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, rather than for liberals or Islamists. Neither the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) nor the Muslim Brotherhood won the majority of seats in parliament as independents won approximately forty percent of seats (many of them later joined the NDP).<sup>20</sup> Similarly, in Jordan, the November 2007 elections saw only six of the Islamic Action Front's twenty-two candidates win seats. In Kuwait's 2008 and 2009 elections for the National Assembly, Hadas gained only three seats and one seat, respectively. Even though the Islamists' had improved their organizational abilities and voter mobilization techniques, they failed to garner a majority. In short, while state restrictions, especially those instituted in Morocco and Jordan described earlier, affected the ability of Islamist groups to compete fairly in elections and were a major reason for the groups' poor showing at the ballot box, shifting voter preferences also played a role.

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<sup>20</sup> The Egyptian Organization for Human Rights (EOHR), "Evaluation of the Electoral System in Egypt," May 14, 2007, available at <<http://www.eohr.org/ar/report/2007/re0514.shtml>>.

## THE ROLE OF THE UNITED STATES

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The American retreat since 2006 from the Bush administration's "Freedom Agenda" has signified that American foreign policy toward the Middle East has shifted, and democracy is no longer considered integral to American strategic interests, as opposed to other traditional interests such as the war on terrorism, maintaining regional stability, guaranteeing Israel's security, and securing sources of oil. This has tarnished the image of the United States and damaged its credibility in the Arab world.

The Obama administration has repeatedly indicated it will not deal with democracy in the Middle East in the same manner as its predecessor. It does not view democracy promotion as part of its broader strategy toward the region, evidenced by the fact that President Obama, in his June 4, 2009 speech in Cairo, showed only limited interest in democracy promotion. The Obama administration has failed to acknowledge the fact that the Arab people are interested in changing their political situation and fighting for their freedom. While the Bush agenda for democracy promotion had its flaws, it gave many young Arabs cover to take a stand in confronting corrupt and failed dictators. For example, Egypt witnessed widespread social and economic unrest during 2007 and 2008, and young people played a vital role in mobilizing the populace against the government. The April 6 Youth Movement in Egypt took hold as young people used new technology (Facebook, blogs, instant messaging) to

support workers who were protesting in the industrial city of El-Mahalla El-Kubra. This movement would not have started, or succeeded, had Egyptians not courageously challenged the regime. Their courage was born, in part, of U.S. policies.

The ultimate problem with U.S. policy towards the Middle East is the confusion between short- and long-term interests. Because of this, policymakers question whether or not U.S. policy should unequivocally support democracy, when they should instead be concentrating on how such support could be implemented. The major shortfall of the Bush administration in its efforts to promote democracy was not the goal, but the path it followed to achieve it. Many activists in the Arab world hoped the Obama administration would revise the Bush strategy for spreading democracy by defining the policy as a long-term strategic goal, but this has not happened.

One specific aspect of American democracy promotion in the Arab world that Washington should reconsider is its unwillingness to engage with Islamist groups. The important question here is: Does the United States need to make contact with moderate Islamists in order to support democracy in the Arab world? The answer is a resounding "yes."

Religion is not merely an ideology for Arabs and Muslims; instead it is a genuine identity. In an

opinion poll conducted by Gallup, ninety-six to ninety-seven percent of those surveyed in Egypt responded that they associate Shari'a with protecting human rights, promoting a fair judicial system, and providing justice for women. In addition, ninety-four percent associated it with the promotion of economic justice.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, a significant percentage of Arab societies look to religion as the basis for reforming economic and social conditions. Arguably, this strong association with religion in the Arab world is a reason secular parties have had difficulty garnering supporters over the past half century. The strong association with Islam also means that the religious and social capital Islamists hold can be easily converted into political capital. Accordingly, the issue is not whether religion should have a place in the political arena, but how interested parties can best assist Arab societies in understanding how religion can, in fact, facilitate a progressive and democratic society. The best way to do this is to actively promote political and cultural openness, which can help curb the creeping growth of Salafism.

Indeed, engagement with moderate Islamists holds benefits for the United States, especially regarding its interest in preventing the spread of Salafism. With political Salafism on the rise in the Arab world, the United States can counter this trend through engagement with moderate Islamists. Promoting political openness and engaging Islamism would be critical elements in facilitating alternatives to Salafism that are more palatable to Washington. Other benefits exist in reaching out to moderate Islamists. Because moderate Islamists are a significant portion of Arab societies, the United States can restore its image and regain credibility in the region by opening channels of communication and dialogue with them (in addition to correcting mistakes in Iraq and having a balanced relationship with Israel).

## HOW SHOULD THE UNITED STATES DEAL WITH MODERATE ISLAMISTS?

The irony in President Obama's preference for dialogue is that amidst talk of engaging former foes, one group seems to have been left out— moderate Islamists. President Obama thus far seems uninterested in opening channels of dialogue with Islamist moderates, be they legally organized as in the case of the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan, the Justice and Development Party in Morocco, and the Movement for the Society of Peace in Algeria, or banned, as with the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Syria, and the Ennahda Movement in Tunisia. Irony aside, there are fundamental problems with this policy. Moderate Islamists have a wider appeal across the Arab and Islamic world than extremists, and are well positioned to challenge Islamic radicalism. Yet, they are being left out of the equation. The following are strategies for the United States to deal with moderate Islamists:

- **Rethink the Basic Understanding of Moderate Islamists.** A great deal of misunderstanding and mistrust persists between moderate Islamists and U.S. policymakers. Both parties bear some responsibility stemming from ideological and political blind spots. Some Islamists see the United States as an imperialist power because of its war in Iraq and unlimited support for Israel. At the same time, others seriously doubt whether the United States will ever put pressure on Arab regimes to permit their integration into the political process. Thus, moderate Islamists themselves have a role to play in remedying the mistrust and misunderstanding. It is up to them to rid themselves of their rigid dislike of the United States and deal with it cognizant of its status as a world power which pursues its own interests. Moreover, they must make serious revisions to their political

<sup>21</sup> Magali Rheault and Dalia Mogahed, "Many Turks, Iranians, Egyptians Link Sharia and Justice," Gallup, July 25, 2008, available at <<http://www.gallup.com/poll/109072/Many-Turks-Iranians-Egyptians-Link-Sharia-Justice.aspx>>.



and religious discourse to become more democratic and supportive of tolerance, pluralism, and equality for all citizens.

For its part, the United States has doubts about the behavior of some of the Islamist groups in question due to their vague positions on democratic values, as well as their positions on Israel and their support for resistance movements such as Hamas and Hizbullah. Despite this, the first step for the United States is to reassess past approaches and begin to see moderate Islamists not as a threat but as a possible partner. In order to do this, the United States needs to develop an understanding of how moderate Islamists think, and what their expectations are of the United States. Four important points merit attention here. First, Washington must understand the differences between the various types of Islamist groups, distinguishing between radicals and hardliners on one side, and moderates on the other. Second, the United States should recognize that many moderate Islamists want to engage in peaceful political participation—a process that would be helped along if the United States was willing to assist their integration into secular politics. Third, the United States must realize that Islamist groups are not just religious movements, but social movements covering a broad sector of Arab society. Fourth, the United States must realize that the political and religious discourse of Islamists is a result of their political environment, and that in order for them to become more progressive, the authoritarian climate in which they operate must also change.

- **Do Not Treat Democracy Promotion Solely as a Response to Terrorism.** Unfortunately, the United States links the spread of democracy in the Arab world with the war on terrorism. Any American policy that communicates democracy primarily as an instrument of U.S.

national security is destined to fail since it will only reinforce Arab perceptions of American hypocrisy; Arabs have the right to political freedom and democracy like the rest of the free world, regardless of any single nation's security concerns. In addition, this perspective constrains efforts to spread democracy, subsuming it under a set of overriding interests, and, accordingly, reduces the chances for rapprochement between the moderate Islamists and the United States.

Even while acknowledging links between democracy and national security, it is in the interest of the United States to encourage the integration of moderate Islamists into the political arena because it reflects U.S. ideals. The added benefit is that Islamists play an important role in curbing extremism and terrorism within the Arab world as well as beyond it. Moderate Islamists are the preferred option in light of the rise of a new political Salafism that supports political activity from a narrow-minded religious and political perspective.

- **Understand the Internal Dynamics of the Moderate Islamist Movements.** It is up to the United States to understand better the nature of the internal conflicts and divisions within Islamist organizations, particularly ongoing disputes between conservatives and reformers, as well as the relative influence of each wing. Arab regimes' efforts to limit political freedoms in their countries has produced debate as well as division within the various mainstream Islamist movements. The current internal debate reflects the desire of many Islamists, particularly those of a younger generation, to influence and change the political and religious discourse of their leaders and movements. In Jordan, there are divisions between the conservative and reformist wings of the Muslim Brotherhood. In Egypt, there is a significant gap within the Brotherhood pitting conservatives against

younger members who complain about and challenge the leadership's grip over the organization. In Algeria, there is serious conflict within the Movement of Society for Peace between Bouguerra Soltani on the one hand and his deputy Abdel- Mujeed Munasara on the other. In the Moroccan Justice and Development Party there is strong disagreement between the party's former general secretary, Saad al-Din Al-Othmani, and Abdelilah Benkirane, who replaced him, over how best to deal with the Moroccan government.

- **Capitalize on the New Generation of Moderate Islamists.** The new generation of moderate Islamists represents a promising future. The United States should invest in building strong relationships with this younger generation who will become the future leadership of their movements. This generation's activists differ from their predecessors in their more pragmatic orientation; their ideological openness to liberal democratic values, such as freedom, pluralism, equality, accountability, and transparency; and willingness to engage with the West. This is, in part, due to their ability to access and interact with modern forms of media and their willingness to consider the examples of moderate Islamist groups in Turkey and Morocco. They continuously direct criticism at their leadership for its lack of faith in democratic values, as is the case with young members of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. Young activists in the Brotherhood have put pressure on the leadership and succeeded in shaping some of its decisions, including its participation in the May 4, 2008 strike to protest rising food prices and sinking wages (the Muslim Brotherhood had declined to participate in the strikes held a month earlier). These activists often deliver sharp criticism of the clogged administrative system within the group and the reactionary

political and religious rhetoric of the conservative leadership. And perhaps most important, most of them have no objection to join with other groups, such as the liberals, leftists, and nationalists, in order to work towards democratization and the entrenchment of political freedoms.

The United States could invest in the coming generation of Islamists by building trust with their leaders and dealing with them respectfully. This could happen through educational exchange programs and strengthening people-to-people communications. Second, the United States should support their right to integrate into secular politics. When Obama took office in January 2009, many young moderates hoped that he would open a new chapter with their movements and support their right to become full political participants in public life. Not surprisingly, then, some expressed a desire to engage with the United States and interact with it as a friend, not as a foe.<sup>22</sup>

In addition, the United States should organize intellectual and cultural forums, encouraging young Islamists to participate in them alongside their liberal and leftist counterparts. The United States should also seek the participation of Islamists in student exchange programs in order to increase mutual understanding between them and young Americans, thereby helping them to more closely identify with the Western democratic experience.

- **Open Channels for Direct Dialogue with Moderate Islamists.** It is impossible for the United States to change its position toward moderate Islamists without adopting an aggressive strategy of face-to-face engagement with them. While the historical mistrust between both parties might complicate this

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<sup>22</sup> Interviews with young Muslim Brotherhood bloggers, Egypt, January-February 2009.



kind of dialogue, there are strong reasons to move forward. If Islamist groups see that the Obama administration is serious and wants to engage with them, they will think hard about building a good relationship with United States. The Obama administration should not miss the opportunity it has to use its credibility and positive image to engage with moderate Islamists. Because engagement is fraught with challenges, the dialogue, at the outset, could take place through a third party, and then proceed to direct dialogue. The first track of engagement could entail increasing areas of cooperation between American non-governmental organizations and research centers and reformist leaders from moderate Islamist movements. Then, the possibility of using an intermediary to reach Islamists in the Arab world could be tested by establishing contact with Islamist leaders or some of the moderate Islamist parties which have good relations

with the United States, such as the Turkish Justice and Development Party.

## CONCLUSION

The 9/11 attacks demonstrated how religion and politics are intertwined in the Middle East. However, the United States has not exerted much effort to understand the real changes in the Islamist spectrum that have taken place over the past decade. It is now time for U.S. policymakers to revisit their strategies toward Islamist groups and realize that democracy promotion in the Arab world means engaging with moderate Islamists. The United States should question and rethink any number of myths surrounding the exclusion of moderate Islamists and then begin to engage with them in a strategic dialogue. The Obama administration should deal with them as partners rather than threats, not only to restore U.S. credibility in the Arab world, but also to preserve American strategic interests in the region.

## PROJECT ON MIDDLE EAST DEMOCRACY AND DEVELOPMENT

This paper was produced as part of the Saban Center for Middle East Policy's Project on Middle East Democracy and Development (MEDD). The project aims to forge a new consensus on behalf of constructive U.S. engagement for change in the Middle East.

MEDD hosts the Patkin Visiting Fellows, experts from the Middle East with direct experience in political and economic reform.

MEDD is built on the premise that economic, social, and political reform must be discussed and advanced together. By pairing political and economic analysis and bringing together U.S., European and regional activists and analysts, MEDD helps build an informed understanding on workable strategies to support political and economic development in the Middle East. These insights strengthen the efforts of regional reformers as they seek to define a more effective course for change. Donor governments and others supporting reform also benefit from a better understanding of how to target their resources and manage complex transitions in the Middle East. The result is more effective development strategies and the creation of greater space for moderate political voices to counter Islamist extremism.

Saban Center publications addressing Middle East democracy and development include:

Tamara Cofman Wittes and Andrew Masloski, *Democracy Promotion Under Obama: Lessons from the Middle East Partnership Initiative*, Saban Center Middle East Memo #13, May 2009;

Tamara Cofman Wittes and Richard Youngs, *Europe, the United States, and Middle Eastern Democracy: Repairing the Breach*, Saban Center Analysis Paper, Number 18, January 2009;

Tamara Cofman Wittes, *Freedom's Unsteady March: America's Role in Building Arab Democracy* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2008);

Steven Heydemann, *Upgrading Authoritarianism in the Arab World*, Saban Center Analysis Paper, Number 13, October 2007;

Tamara Cofman Wittes & Andrew Masloski, *Elections in the Arab World: Progress or Peril?*, Saban Center Middle East Memo #11, February 12, 2007;

Tamara Cofman Wittes & Sarah E. Yerkes, *What Price Freedom? Assessing the Bush Administration's Freedom Agenda*, Saban Center Analysis Paper, Number 10, September 2006;

Abdel Monem Said Aly, *An Ambivalent Alliance: The Future of U.S.-Egyptian Relations*, Saban Center Analysis, Number 6, January 2006.

## THE SABAN CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST POLICY

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