Dynamics in political Islam and challenges for European policies

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Current dynamics and trends in political Islam

As the contributions to this volume illustrate, there is no single trend or tendency among Islamist actors in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) today. Rather, four major trends can be identified.

First, countries whose politics are dominated by the Arab–Israeli conflict have been facing challenges that stem from mainstream Islamists engaging in electoral politics while maintaining armed wings that engage in 'resistance' against Israel. Islamists in Lebanon (Hizbullah) and the Palestinian territories (Hamas) have participated in elections, in parliament, and in government, and have, in principle, renounced violence in the domestic power play.[1] They have both, however, used weapons not only in the confrontation with Israel, but also in the fight against their domestic political opponents when they have seen their position threatened. In Lebanon, Hizbullah and its allies staged a show of force in May 2008 to institutionalise a power of veto on government decisions and safeguard the weapons of the 'resistance'. In the Palestinian territories, after having won elections in 2006, Hamas saw its efforts at governing undermined. It pre-empted being ousted from power by violently assuming control of the Gaza Strip in June 2007. The results of the use of force differed substantially for the two entities: Hizbullah's 2008 show of force unlocked the political blockade that had paralysed the country since late 2006. It led to the Doha compromise, which re-established a government of national unity with veto powers for the opposition and paved the way for elections in mid-2009. Hamas's 2007 violent takeover of the Gaza Strip led to a geopolitical split of the Palestinian Authority – where today we witness two competing, authoritarian political systems being consolidated in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

What has widely been viewed by Arab publics as successful steadfastness in confronting Israel has won the Islamist national liberation movements extensive popularity in the region. Their domestic experience has also suggested to many that armed struggle rather than electoral politics pays greater political dividends. Still, and in spite of the admiration that Hizbullah and Hamas arouse, they have not generated imitators.

Second, a new trend among Salafist actors has been noticed as some of them have abandoned their reluctance to engage in participatory politics. This is particularly remarkable as these Islamists traditionally have been preoccupied with

[1] For the religious underpinnings of Hamas's stances as well as the entrenchment of radical views owing to Israeli military campaigns, see the chapter by Khaled al-Hashimi, "Understanding Hamas's radicalisation" in the present volume.

emulating the 'righteous' or 'pious predecessors' (*al-salaf al-salih*) and have concentrated on fundamentals of faith as well as doctrinal purity. Yet in recent years, some Salafist groups (for example in Lebanon, Kuwait and Yemen) have overcome principled stances on restricting their activities to issues of faith and seeing their role mostly as one of 'guardians of pure Islam'. They have thus come not only to engage in the public sphere but also in elections and parliaments. As Omayma Abdel-Latif points out in her contribution, in Lebanon, some of these 'new Salafists' have also criticised confessionalism and taken a notable stance on dialogue with other political groups such as Hizbullah, hence breaking out of the pattern of sectarian politics.[2] Engagement in politics has also led to quite substantial revisions with regard to issues pertaining to political and religious thought – as Lebanese Salafists have, at least de facto, accepted the Lebanese state, the legitimacy of a non-Muslim president and confessional pluralism. A similar trend can be discerned among Kuwaiti Salafists, who have recognised the constitution and concepts such as sovereignty held by the people, as well as political pluralism. While these new Salafists represent a marginal trend in Lebanon at present, in the May 2008 parliamentary elections in Kuwait, Salafists captured record shares of the vote, thereby sidelining the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated Islamic Constitutional Movement (ICM or Hadas).

Third, the performance of the Turkish Justice and Development Party (AKP) stands as a major example of the successful 'de-radicalisation' of an Islamist party. As Senem Aydın Düzgit and Ruşen Çakır highlight, the AKP has evolved from a Welfare Party that had been committed to "reformist fundamentalism" to a party that pursues "strategic modernism", and embraces pluralist democracy and a capitalist market economy.[3] Indeed, rather than pursuing an Islamic state through the democratic process, the AKP has undertaken fundamental reform in the field of democratisation and the stabilisation of the economy. It has entered into accession talks with the EU and used the Copenhagen criteria for EU accession to bolster its course of political reform. The pace of reform, however, has slowed considerably during the AKP's second term in office. At the same time, significant sectors of Turkish society have been concerned about the AKP's social politics, which have been perceived as encouraging the Islamisation of Turkish society (e.g. through its public sector recruitment policies) and undermining the secular order. The promotion of conservative social values by the AKP, backed by pious and conservative middle classes, holds strong potential for increased Islamisation. Meanwhile, forces in the administration and the military have been afraid of having their influence reduced further by way of reform – framing their interests as concerns about the AKP's commitment to secularism and democracy.

Fourth and possibly most relevant in the MENA region, the so-called 'moderate Islamists' – i.e. those Islamists who have renounced violence as an instrument to achieve their domestic policy goals and who are ready to work from within the respective political system[4] – scored some impressive early electoral

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[2] See the chapter in this volume by Omayma Abdel-Latif, "Trends in Salafism".

[3] See the chapter by Senem Aydın Düzgit and Ruşen Çakır, "Turkey: A sustainable case of de-radicalisation?" in the present volume.

[4] On this definition of moderate Islamists, see Muriel Asseburg, *Moderate Islamists as Reform Actors: Conditions and Programmatic Change*, SWP Research Paper No. 4, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, Berlin, April 2007, p. 9. Thus, 'moderate' should not be understood as a value judgment about the Islamists' political and social goals. It does not mean that these groups necessarily espouse values that would correspond with a European understanding of

successes. But in recent years, they have been unable to increase their representation in parliaments. In addition, they have been unable to translate their participation into meaningful influence on their countries' decision-making processes. As Robert Springborg argues, the entrenchment of authoritarianism and the increase in repression in the MENA region has weakened opposition actors, chiefly moderate Islamists.[5] This has been particularly evident in those countries that have allowed the Muslim Brotherhood or its offshoot organisations to contest elections, such as Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco and Yemen. In some cases (Morocco, Kuwait, Algeria and Yemen), the existence of Islamist political organisations that are more radical may also account for the weakening of the more established moderate Islamists, which have increasingly been viewed as having been co-opted and having lost their role as a clean alternative to the actors in power.[6]

As a result, in many countries of the MENA region Islamist groups and their followers have become frustrated and disillusioned with electoral and parliamentary politics, as they have realised how constrained is the impetus they can have in the façade democracies of the region. This realisation has had quite diverse effects on Islamist movements and their constituencies. Among them, we have witnessed highly controversial, programmatic debates in some movements, e.g. the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood's debate on a draft platform.[7] But above all, we have seen an increase in political apathy or a turn towards non-political, more quietest forms of Islam among Arab publics, such as Sufism (which has been encouraged by some regimes), as well as a growing appeal of more fundamentalist Islamists.

Nevertheless, the lack of success in achieving any of their short- to medium-term objectives has not led moderate Islamists to turn away from participatory politics or to engage in violence.[8] Most organisations have accepted that their room for manoeuvre is small and they have adapted their strategies to avoid openly challenging incumbent regimes and rather strengthened their commitment to working from within the respective political system. As Springborg concludes, "In sum, the real challenge may not be the rise to power of radical Islamists or violence committed by them, but the perpetuation and even strengthening of authoritarian rule as a result of moderate Islamists becoming strategic partners of at least some elements of incumbent regimes".[9]

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democracy. Here – as with other forces in the region – we can find instead a broad spectrum of approaches ranging from the ideological to the more pragmatic, from the socially conservative to the more progressive.

[5] See the chapter by Robert Springborg, "Is the EU contributing to re-radicalisation?" in the present volume.

[6] Ibid.

[7] The draft espoused socially conservative provisions, such as neither women nor Copts would be eligible to run for the presidency and a religious oversight body was to be established. It aroused a very controversial debate within the Brotherhood as well as among scholars and journalists, and it was subsequently relegated to the backburner. See the contribution by Ibrahim El Houdaiby in this volume, "Trends in political Islam in Egypt".

[8] For recent trends among moderate Islamists, see also Ana Echagüe, "The radicalisation of moderate Islamist parties: Reality or chimera?" in the present volume.

[9] See Springborg, op. cit., p. 18.

EU policies and their effects

In recent years, against the backdrop of Islamist terrorism on the one hand and election victories by moderate Islamists on the other, Europeans have become increasingly aware of the phenomenon of political Islam and of its diverse facets, as well as the need to develop policies for addressing the issue. In its 2004 position paper on a *Strategic Partnership with the Mediterranean and the Middle East*, the EU acknowledged for the first time, if only implicitly, that moderate Islamists should no longer be excluded from measures aimed at democracy promotion.[10] A 2007 European Parliament resolution on reforms in the Arab World made this approach even more explicit, as it called on Europeans "to give visible political support to…those political organisations which promote democracy…including, where appropriate, secular actors and moderate Islamists".[11] In the 2005 strategy document on *Combating Radicalisation and Recruitment to Terrorism,* the EU stressed "the need to empower moderate voices by engaging with Muslim organisations and faith groups that reject the distorted version of Islam put forward by al-Qa'ida and others".[12]

In practice, however, European engagement with Islamists has lagged far behind these ambitions.[13] While some European governments have established specific divisions or task forces for dialogue with the Islamic world, these have often focused on religious and cultural issues rather than on politics. Such efforts have not succeeded in institutionalising channels of dialogue that would have helped to calm tensions in times of crisis, for instance during the uproar surrounding the Danish Muhammad cartoons. In addition, not only have debates on a common EU policy line as to with whom, how and when to engage not yielded results, but as Kristina Kausch details, for various reasons official representatives of European governments and the EU have also been very reluctant to establish regular contact and build relations with Islamist forces.[14] When exchanges have taken place, they have generally been informal, bilateral and low profile.

Europeans have established contacts with representatives of those Islamist parties that are legally recognised political actors with parliamentary representation, such as the Moroccan Party for Justice and Development, the Islamic Action Front, the Kuwaiti ICM and the Bahraini al-Wefaq. Yet they have been somewhat disinclined to establish such links – at least on an official level – with Islamists in countries that have regimes that discourage such contacts, e.g. in Algeria or Egypt. They have shunned official contacts in countries where Islamist parties are illegal, e.g. in Tunisia and Syria. Furthermore, even those forces with which Europeans are in contact have very rarely been supported by EU democracy promotion programmes or cooperation initiatives.

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[10] European Council, *Final Report on an EU Strategic Partnership with the Mediterranean and the Middle East*, June 2004 (retrieved from http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cmsUpload/Partnership%20Mediterranean%20and%20Middle%20East.pdf).

[11] This document is quoted in Kristina Kausch, "Europe's engagement with moderate Islamists" in the present volume.

[12] Also quoted in Kausch, *supra*.

[13] Interestingly, European policies have also lagged behind US efforts at capacity and coalition building among opposition forces (including moderate Islamists) in some MENA countries, e.g. Yemen and Morocco.

[14] See Kausch, op. cit.

In the end, by not establishing and maintaining contacts with all relevant segments of society in the region and by not developing ties with moderate Islamist groups, Europeans have so far missed out on an opportunity to engage those groups that often form the most popular and best organised opposition. This has also meant that Europeans have had no instruments at their disposal to exert influence on debates within these movements or to work towards de-radicalisation. While Europeans have pushed for trade liberalisation and better governance, and engaged in civil society support, on the level of high politics they have closely collaborated with the MENA's authoritarian rulers and been reluctant to press for sustained political liberalisation or to address human rights issues. They have thus contributed little to making participatory politics more attractive for the region's opposition forces.

Finally yet importantly, European policies have been highly contradictory with regard to contact with those forces that have military wings, i.e. the Lebanese Hizbullah and the Palestinian Hamas. Europeans do not face any legal impediments to speaking to and cooperating with Hizbullah representatives (except for the Dutch, who designated Hizbullah a terrorist group in 2004), as the EU does not consider Hizbullah a terrorist organisation; yet some European governments still have been reluctant to engage in official high-level contact. Nonetheless, as a rule, they have maintained open lines of communication with the party. By contrast, such lines have been cut with Hamas, which was designated a terrorist organisation by the EU in 2003. After Hamas's landslide victory in the 2006 elections, the international community adopted the so-called 'Quartet criteria', which conditioned diplomatic contacts and cooperation with the Hamas-led government on Hamas renouncing the use of violence, recognising Israel's right to exist and accepting all previous agreements. In this regard, Europeans adopted a maximalist interpretation of what the designation of Hamas as a terrorist organisation was to mean: while they were not legally in a position to cooperate with Hamas financially and politically, it would not have been mandatory to adopt a policy of no contact as the EU did. Actually, through US influence, all Quartet members with the exception of Russia adopted an isolationist approach, and after Hamas's violent takeover of the Gaza Strip, backed the Israeli embargo – putting Gaza's population under massive pressure to change its political preferences by imposing measures of collective punishment. As Europeans have toed the US policy line, they have contributed to empowering the hardliners in the movement, strengthening Hamas's alliance with Iran and entrenching the geopolitical split between the West Bank and Gaza.

Ultimately, the European stance on Hamas has not only contributed to the 're-radicalisation' of Hamas and seriously undermined European efforts at state building in the Palestinian territories, but it has also done enormous damage to the credibility of the EU as a democracy promoter in the whole region. In general, failure to resolve the region's conflicts, first and most importantly the Arab–Israeli conflict, has helped extremists thrive and mobilise around radical slogans.

Main challenges and policy recommendations

To date, there is no consensus among European policy-makers about which Islamist groups to engage with, the purposes of such engagement or how. In their contribution, Nona Mikhelidze and Nathalie Tocci specify three good reasons for engaging with Islamists: to better understand an important political force as well as

realities in the region, to support political openings, and to include relevant actors and potential spoilers in peace processes or efforts at conflict management.[15]

Indeed, a *first* reason Europeans should engage with Islamists is to understand their thinking, priorities and agendas, as these forces are so relevant in their societies. Dialogue with Islamists would also help Europeans get an additional reading of realities in the Middle East – rather than just relying on the interpretations of those who think like they do or who speak in a manner to which they are accustomed. On top of that, dialogue should also be about building bridges. Europeans have a strong interest in reaching out and establishing channels of communication that diverge from the 'us vs. them' and 'the West against Islam' paradigms, not least because of geographical proximity and large Muslim minorities in some European states. Still, as Abdel-Latif points out, such dialogue will hardly be successful as long as one side dictates the agenda, rather than both sides meeting eye-to-eye.[16] Nor will it resonate widely if European dialogue activities are not broadened to include major segments of society. It is in the European interest not to condition dialogue on certain criteria, but instead to have open lines of communication with a broad spectrum of social and political forces.

A *second* reason Europeans should engage with Islamists as well as with other societal and political forces is to support political change in the region. This would mean working towards more participatory and less repressive systems, with a view to preventing political apathy and radicalism and preparing the regimes for 'soft landings', while avoiding revolutionary upheavals – with all the negative side effects they could entail for Europe. Political liberalisation or even democratisation cannot be achieved if the mainstream forces of political Islam – in many countries of the region the only well-organised and most popular opposition – are excluded from the political process.

If the European commitment to democracy is not mere lip service, Europeans should choose a three-dimensional approach. They should a) put pressure on incumbent regimes to abandon their repression of moderate Islamists and other peaceful opposition forces and grant all forces access to the political arena. They should b) aim at influencing the legal and political frameworks that regulate social and political participation in the MENA region. It is important not to set all one's hope on domestic reform actors, but to try to affect change directly as well, not least because it is the also conditions under which actors participate in the system that shape their agendas and priorities. As the Turkish example shows, competitive political systems with established democratic procedures tend to support trends among Islamists that favour procedural democratic reform and acceptance of important tenets of liberal democracy. This would imply using the political tools available, such as the political dialogue provided for in the Association Agreement of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership as well as the Action Plans of the European Neighbourhood Policy, to address issues of governance along with human rights and civil liberties. Benchmarking, which to date has only been done in the areas of trade policy and economic reform, could likewise be implemented to affect human rights guarantees, to lift the states of emergency, to work towards liberal party and association laws, to install independent electoral commissions, and to grant freedom

[15] See in the present volume the chapter by Nona Mikhelidze and Nathalie Tocci, "How can Europe engage with Islamist movements?".

[16] See Abdel-Latif, op. cit.

of opinion and assembly, etc. So far, we have not been able to see how much influence the EU and its member states could have in this regard, as European policy-makers have not used their political and economic weight to boost change. Thus, rather than focus training and capacity building activities on civil society actors, Europeans should c) increase cooperation with political opposition forces – Islamist as well as non-Islamist. Obviously, such activities would not embrace actors who engage in or propagate the use of violence. But they should not necessarily be restricted to the most progressive Islamists. Europeans should avoid being perceived as trying to pick winners and instead encourage participation across the board.[17]

In this context, the EU should not simply be urging the earliest possible elections, but should rather push for legislation and political practice that would first allow for freedom of association and the formation of political parties. Where elections are held, Europe should signal in advance a clear interest in free and fair elections and offer to provide election observers. Even more importantly, of course, the EU should accept the outcome of such elections and refrain from undermining elected governments. As the Hamas case has shown, the international isolation of the 'Islamic Resistance Movement' has helped in no way to meet the challenges, but contributed a lot to making the situation worse. Again, dialogue with democratically elected governments should not be conditioned.

A *third* reason Europeans should engage with Islamists is to get militant forces such as the Palestinian Hamas and the Lebanese Hizbullah on board for conflict management and to allow for inclusive peace processes. In these cases, it is evident that Europeans will also have to deal with forces that have not renounced violence or that figure on some terrorist list. Indeed, the more fragile the environment and the more influence such groups wield, the more Europeans should seek open lines of communication. If the EU seriously wants to contribute to regional stability and prevent further radicalisation, it needs to work towards settling the major conflicts in the region, above all the Arab–Israeli conflict, on which radical forces thrive. And it will not be successful in doing so as long as it follows a policy that isolates major forces with considerable spoiling power. Finally, Europeans should be aware that the idea of weakening or destroying the attractiveness of the 'Islamist model' by causing Islamist groups like Hamas to fail through isolation and pressure is unrealistic. Interventions that follow such a strategy contain the risk of a massive destabilisation, as they promote popular radicalisation and open the field for jihadist actors who are not tied to a national agenda and who are not open to negotiation or compromise.

[17] See Echagüe, op. cit.