

The Institute for Middle East Studies

Islamist Political Movements in the Arab World: Contentious and Electoral

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*****Notes prepared by Dina Bishara. Please do not quote or cite without IMES permission.*****

By way of introduction, Nathan Brown pointed out that the workshop is inspired by a realization that there is a group of academics who have experience doing empirical work in the Middle East on Islamist movements and who are at various stages in their research on the political participation of Islamist movements and its effects on these movements. The goal is to allow participants to present work in progress, giving them an opportunity to develop this work further based on early feedback.

SESSION 1: INTELLECTUAL AND IDEOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENTS. DINA KHOURY CHAIR, CARRIE WICKHAM AND NASR ARIF PRESENTERS, BABER JOHANSEN, DISCUSSANT

Carrie Wickham

Wickham's research project—started in 2004—explores how political participation triggers change in Islamist actors' strategic interests and ideological commitments. Looking at mainstream Islamist movements in Egypt, Morocco, Jordan, and Kuwait, Wickham argues that a process of "auto-reform" has accompanied these movements' political evolution. "Auto-reform" refers to changes in the movement's goals and strategies advocated by its own members. Its main features include:

- An initial decision to join the political game; this decision is mainly instrumental and is justified by gaining a foot in the system
- A process of "pragmatic de-radicalization," that occurs as a result of political participation. Although Islamists' initial motivation for participation is to change the system, they end up being changed by it.
- As part of bid to gain legitimacy as new players in the system, Islamist movements have exercised a degree of self-restraint and reached out to other political actors in an attempt to gain recognition.

Islamist auto-reform is also driven by deeper processes of socialization. Once they opt to participate, Islamist movements adopt new roles and strategies that reflect their new status. They start to have greater internal transparency, democracy, and professionalism. This is best exemplified in the case of Morocco's Justice and Development Party. Ideologically, the PJD remains committed to *shari`a* rule but what that means is a moving target.

In essence, the dynamics of political participation—and decisions on forming cross-ideological alliances—have led elite members of these movements to have sustained debates, not just on strategic, but also ideological

matters. For now, these debates are confined to small groups behind closed doors. But what is evident is that a new understanding of Islam is beginning to gain ground.

Discussion of Wickham's remarks

- *Wickham has opened a very optimistic view on Islamist movements by shedding light on the changes they undergo as a result of political participation. At the same time, however, she acknowledges that specific institutional conditions are responsible for the de-radicalization of these movements, which begs the question of what happens in the absence of these conditions (Baber Johansen).*

Semi-authoritarian political contexts encourage pragmatic de-radicalization and in contrast to what Johansen is implying, more openness would not necessarily create more pragmatism. In the face of sustained pressure to obtain acceptance in institutional settings which they do not control and which encompass rival centers of power, Islamists are more likely to de-radicalize their agendas than they would have, had the way been clear for them to convert their mass support into political power.

- *Wickham highlights examples of normative extension; but what about normative retraction? (Philbrick Yadav)*

Yes. The term auto-reform is deliberately chosen because of its fluidity. Change is not monolithic; it varies across issue-areas and is open to internal debate.

- *Processes of socialization and professionalization may not reflect ideological change, which Wickham insists does occur. How can this change be measured? And how can it be distinguished from more tactical considerations? For instance, there are puzzles about Hamas's behavior. It hasn't moved on its ideological platform even though it has a lot to lose from that policy (Mediam).*

Both interests and ideology drive behavior. Empirically, the relative weight of strategic versus normative change is difficult to measure. However, there are real normative shifts that can be observed. This becomes evident when Islamist movements decide to take certain strategic options off the table.

- *At what point do Islamist movements decide that political participation is not paying off? What's the tipping point? Do these private deliberations lead to organizational splits? And how do they trickle down to the movements' broader constituencies? (Lynd)*

At this point, ideological transformations—to the extent that they are taking place—occur at the level of individual actors. Whether such transformations will move to the group level depends on many factors, including the relative strength of hardliners and reformist factions; internal decision-making procedures; and the social profile and orientations of the group's mass base.

- *How do the different combinations of openings and constraints vary across the four cases and what does that mean for the process of auto-reform? What about the relationship between Islamists and non-state actors? (Dunne)*

There are institutional variations and they do matter. For instance, in Morocco, where the PJD enjoys legal status as a political party, there is a much higher level of professionalization than in Egypt.

- *To what extent is it possible for the MB or the PJD to pull back from the strategy of participation? What role do international constraints play, if any? (Shehata)*
- *It seems that there are other factors (other than authoritarian constraints), such as competition among various movements and parties. There is also a literature having to do with leaders and followers, which might be insightful in terms of how followers are reacting to the process of de-radicalization (Lidibadi).*

Nasr Arif

Arif pointed out that a book on sources of Islamist political thought, which he had worked on in the 1980s, concluded that most scholars in the Muslim world do not refer to more than 12% of Islamic thought.

- Contemporary Islamist movements often combine various elements of Islamic discourse, which include human life, values, and methods. These movements are political by definition since they are dealing with the public sphere.
- Islamist movements have different background, which makes it impossible to treat them in the same way. Even within the same movement, different leaderships have different frames of reference.
- Studies of Islamist movements often conflate the cultural and ideological dimensions of Islam, by focusing, for instance, on socially-conservative positions adopted by Islamist movements. Significantly, Islamist movements themselves manipulate these two dimensions to their advantage.
- The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood is internally authoritarian, which is evidenced by the lack of internal elections.
- Islamist movements use their ideology merely as a justification for their socio-political agenda.

Discussion of Arif's remarks

- *Arif suggests that the Quran does not provide a detailed account of political legal institutions, but does the long history of Islamic thought not have a lot to say about the nature of an Islamic political system? (Johansen)*

Fiqh is important in building norms, but the idea of a "state" is not clear. There are also linguistic connotations, since "dawla" means change. It is also important to keep in mind that there are disputes between Islamist movement and modern states about the interpretation of Islam in constitutional articles. Both the state and Islamist movements maintain that they have a claim to Islam.

- *But how have the courts dealt with constitutional articles that say that Islam is the source of shari'a? (Johansen)*

SESSION 2: ISLAMIST MOVEMENTS. MICHELE DUNNE CHAIR, MARC LYNCH AND AMR HAMZAWY PRESENTERS, MARK LICHBACH, DISCUSSANT

Marc Lynch

Lynch explored the ways in which changes in the media have influenced political opportunity structures in Arab polities. Capitalizing on transformations in the media to launch a campaign against Mubarak, the Egyptian Movement for Change (Kifaya) is a prime example of these transformations could change political opportunity structures in a given country. The changing political environment in a given country also influences the extent to which different actors are able to take advantage of media changes at a given time. The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt is always as able to take advantage from changes in the media as Kifaya and MB bloggers have not been able to attract as much attention as other bloggers.

Two issues are worth considering when assessing the impact of media changes on political opportunity structures in Arab countries:

- The actual structure of transformations in the media. There are national and regional distinctions. On the regional level, there are also distinctions between the pre-Al-Jazeera era and the post-Al-Jazeera era, characterized by market fragmentation, which in turn creates different kinds of incentives.
- Whether this new kind of media environment differentially empowers certain kinds of groups or generations. It is also important ask whether this new environment creates a real political opening and whether it is capable of sustaining lasting political change.

Discussions of Lynch's remarks

- *One should also accounts for the way cultural and structural issues are framed differently. To what extent do these media transformations really make a difference? How do they impact factions within opposition movements and ruling elites? (Libahadi)*

- *It is important to recognize that these new media involve political struggles among various elites and governments. How do al-Jazeera and other news networks affect domestic electoral behavior for instance? (Arif)*

There are no data to do content analysis on Arab media, but discussions with political actors reveal that these actors have a very clear idea of the impact of the media. It is also clear that there are real differences and competition between news networks like al-Jazeera and al-Arabiya. The latter does not air live talk shows, while the former does. The proliferation of satellite channels has made it impossible for any one channel to make a big difference.

- *What about media preferences in extreme situations; there is a tendency for media to focus on demonstrations or political violence (Mecham)*
- *How do these transformations affect Islamist movements? What kinds of MB leaderships seize upon on these transformations? (Wickham)*

Amr Hamzawy

Primarily on the basis of research on the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and Moroccan the Justice and Development party (although the argument could extend to other Islamist movements in the Arab world), Hamzawy suggests that Islamist movements have, in recent years, developed a strategic commitments to participation in electoral politics. Notwithstanding differences across Islamist movements, the rationale for political participation appears to be based on a set of common priorities:

- An attempt to provide a shield against government repression and to protect the space that Islamist movements have occupied in recent years
- An attempt to move away from being an anti-system opposition and to emerge as responsible political actors that are willing to work with both governments and other oppositions
- Press for democratic reforms and increase the level of government accountability
- An attempt to better serve the needs (moral, cultural, and economic) of their constituents

Political participation affects Islamist movements in various ways (tentative points)

- It increases their level of institutional sophistication, manifested in the move towards more professionalization and technological sophistication.
- It seems to result in the emergence or the deepening of a functional separation between the movements and their political arms (or the movement and the parliamentary bloc in the Egyptian case).
- In terms of Islamist platforms and objectives, participation in legal politics seems to push the movements to focus on public policies (the case of the PJD is an even clearer example of this). Therefore, it results de facto in devaluing—but not excluding—holistic claims such as the application of shari'a or the Islamization of society (the marji'iyah debate).

Participation in legal politics faces Islamist movements with two challenges:

- The trap of semi-authoritarianism – There is a limit to how much Islamists movements are able to accomplish in semi-authoritarian settings. As a result, they risk being perceived (even by their own constituents) as co-opted (domesticated) opposition.
- (tentative point) As political actors, Islamist movements are expected to make decisions much more quickly. This pace is foreign to ideological actors that have always debated shifts in their rhetoric and platform very seriously (coherence and lack of factionalism have been stable characteristics of Islamist movements). Participation in legal politics seems to subject Islamist movements to pressure that disrupt this pattern of long deliberation. This is manifested in the recent debate within the Egyptian MB over the formation of a political party, and the incoherence in public statements about the party.

Discussions of Hamzawy's remarks¹

- *Hamzawy describes the MB as an ideologically coherent group, but could it be argued that the movement is ideologically thin since it is more focused on activism? (Dunne)*
- *The Egyptian MB is not really ideological (Arif)*

These are ideological movements but their ideological are elastic. For the most part, Islamist leaders talk the process of social reform as a long-term project.
- *What about the relationship between Islamist parties and their mother movements? In what way does the movement constrain the options of the party association? (Wickham)*

Both processes of pressure from movement on party and vice versa do occur.
- *Explain the choice of the word "strategic." It could be argued that there is a thin line between strategic and ideological*

There is plenty of reason to understand the Islamist movements' decision to participate in politics using terms such as strategic and ideological. It is clear that these movements speak in ideological terms and that their actions are subject to careful deliberation.

What is changing in this ideological commitment if the shari`a reference continues to be central?

There has been a shift in discourse; some Islamist movements have started to talk about an Islamic frame of reference. But Islamist movements cannot entirely drop the reference to shari`a; if they do, they are no longer Islamist. Yet, there is some internal opposition against the shari`a reference. Those who voice this opposition may not be powerful in terms of turning people to the ballot box, but they are powerful in terms of international media and scale. Whether this is a real shift in ideology is an open question.

SESSION 3: ISLAMIST ELECTORAL PARTIES. MARINA OTTAWAY CHAIR, SAMER SHEHATA AND QUINN MECHAM PRESENTERS; MUSTAPHA KHALFI, DISCUSSANT

Samer Shehata

Shehata explained that his initial interest in elections in authoritarian regimes led him to explore the political participation of Islamist movements in these elections and in parliament. By following candidates through their campaigns for Egypt's parliamentary elections, he found that the most interesting cases were those of MB candidates. MB candidates ran the most organized campaigns, and once in parliament they were able to reinvigorate the institution. But the Egyptian case also demonstrates that participation does have an impact on Islamist movements. The MB's parliamentary bloc is much more technologically sophisticated and professionalized than members of the parent movement. The bloc has rented an apartment building for five years, and has set up a media office; by contrast the movement's headquarters seems old fashioned and underdeveloped.

Quinn Mecham

Mecham's initial observations (based on a new research project on Islamist participation in Turkey) suggest that Islamist parties are most likely to attract a large number of voters at first and then experience a relatively slow decline. Unlike what is commonly held, Islamist movements are prone to internal splits, especially if non-Arab cases are considered. Mecham distinguishes between ideological moderation and the process of "normalization," which refers to the movement's decision to adhere to the rules set the regime. To him, Turkey's AKP—which has pushed moral issues aside— is no longer truly Islamic; this raises a number of questions:

- To what extent can these kinds of changes be seen in authoritarian settings?

¹ Responses in this section reflect Nathan Brown's attempt to answer on behalf of Amr Hamzawy.

- How does the presence of institutional opportunities to get a share in power influence the chances for normalization?
- Do Islamists want to seek more centrist constituencies—a process that would require political learning and a risk of alienating some long-standing supporters?

Discussion of Shehata and Mecham

- *Ottaway suggested that the cost of political participation for the Islamist movements could come in terms of the decision to join government, not necessarily to participate in parliament. It seems that fragmentation depends on the case. The Egyptian MB is not fragmenting at this point, which might be explained by the fact that the organization was already quite established by the time it decided to participate in elections. In contrast, there are three small Islamist parties in Algeria, which could be attributed to the absence of a centralized Islamist movement after the civil war.*

Splits do occur over participation; some occur after the elections when the results outcomes are less than satisfactory (Mecham).

- *What are some of the dynamics in the relationship between the MB parliamentary bloc and the MB leadership (Wickham)*

There is certainly a separation between the two. The MB parliamentary bloc is more professionalized; there are also training seminars for MB deputies (Shehata).

The parties' membership is changing. For instance, the Wasat party has Christian members. There are institutional changes in the parties themselves (Mecham).

- *Islamist movements are known for their anti-corruption stances and for their austerity; how do their increased resources influence that image? (Philbrick Yadav)*

MPs use state funds very effectively and even the government is keener on giving them money because it knows that they will do a better job allocating it (Shehata)

- *Is there some kind of international learning process? And why are Islamists better students than others? (Brown)*

- *Why is there a resignation to the idea that constraints imposed by authoritarian regimes are in fact vital to this process of moderation? (Lynd)*

- *Who is advising the Islamists? And how does the fact that kings in Jordan or Morocco claim to derive their legitimacy from Islam influence these regimes' relationship with Islamist movements? (Arif)*

SESSION 4: INTEGRATION INTO THE POLITICAL SYSTEM: STACEY PHILBRICK YADAV AND NATHAN BROWN PRESENTERS, SANJAY RUPARELIA, DISCUSSANT

Stacey Philbrick Yadav

Philbrick Yadav just completed a doctoral dissertation about the transformation of discourse within the Yemeni Islah party and Hizbollah and has an interest in the question of moderation. She argued that there are three basic approaches to the question of moderation:

- A minimum practical standard based on non-violence.
- A more behavioral standard that measures moderation in terms of the relation to the state.
- A widening of worldview, introduced by Jillian Schwedler

Philbrick Yadav suggests that the state-centric model might be too limiting because it overlooks the transnational and sub-national sites of authority that Islamist movements look to. In an attempt to encompass these transnational and national sites of authority, she uses the tool of takfir and takhwin and how Islamist movements deal with them as an indicator of moderation. In an attempt to analyze Islamist appeals to transnational and sub-national sites of authority, she examines the practices of takfir and takhwin.

Discussion of Philbrick Yadav's remarks

- *These approaches are more like indicators. There needs to be a distinction between the conception of moderation and the indicators of moderation as well as a distinction between what moderation means to Islamist movements and what it means to scholars (Ruparelia)*
- *How can Hizbollah's actions over the summer of 2006 and the movement's current demands be explained?*

Hizbollah's demands for more representation are constitutive of and not contradictory to state authority.

Nathan Brown

Brown suggested two indicators of the degree to which Islamist movements are integrated political actors—one from the side of Islamist movements themselves and the second from the side of the regime. When it comes to the issue of shari`a, the important question is not whether or not Islamist movements are dedicated to it, but rather the mechanisms through which they wish to implement it. The answer is not uniform across Islamist movements. In Egypt, Abdul Monem Abul Fotouh, member of the MB's guidance bureau (but who is on the more moderate end of the movement), believes that the Egyptian constitution only needs to be implemented and even suggests that the supreme constitutional court would be the arbiter if disputes over interpretation arise. In contrast, Jordanian Islamists have mentioned an intention to refer issues to Islamic legal scholars, thus bypassing the democratic process.

From the side of the regimes, the question is whether it is willing to establish a clear set of stable rules allowing for pluralist competition or whether it constantly shifts the rules, manipulating them to produce desired results.

Introducing a comparative perspective, Brown discussed some parallels that could be drawn between a large number of European movements (Christian, socialist, green, populist) that have emerged over the last 100-150 years:

- All were anti-system parties or were difficult to incorporate
- They were broad social movements, not just electoral parties
- The literature on European movements highlights three issues:
 - When these movements were successfully incorporated, their incorporation took place not on the national level but on the local level or that of some sub-national organization. But in the Arab world, the field for democratic politics and pluralist contestation has narrowed sharply in places like local government and professional associations in recent years.
 - In all of these examples, parties were associated with larger movements and the relationship between the two was never an easy one. Something similar is going on in the Arab world—a complicated relationship between broader movement and electoral party, with each one affecting the other in ways that are difficult to predict.
 - In 19th and early 20th century Europe, democracy itself was being contested and these movements were part of this battle. This is much more difficult in the Arab world because institutions are there on paper but are not really activated. This robs democratic promises of their value.

Discussion of Brown's remarks

- *It seems like the stability of rules is a very crucial element. It is difficult to talk about general trends if rules are constantly changing. It is equally difficult for the actors themselves to react when the rules are changing (Ruparelia)*

- *What are some of the differences between Islamist movements and the European movements? (Mecham)*

Islamist political parties are the only political parties in some cases, which is not the case in the European context.

In European cases, there are centralized institutions. This is very different from the context of Islamist parties, where it is much more difficult to account for speaks on behalf of the movements' social network.

➤ *Why is it more difficult to embed existing institutions than it is to create new ones? (Mecham)*

Democracy works best if contestation precedes the formation of institutions.

PUBLIC SESSION

Mark Lichbach

According to Lichbach, the day's discussions emphasized that to be a properly designed, a research project on Islamist movements needs to begin by focusing on a well-defined actor and placing it a state context, whose electoral rules are taken into account. The project also needs to account for competition between secular and Islamist political parties, the goals of the Islamist party, the preference of the population of the country under study, and the role of outside actors who might lends support to the Islamist party. A comparison between secular and Islamist in at least two different countries would be a useful tool as well.

Baber Johansen

Johansen identified three problems that arose during the discussions:

- A discussion of the integration of Islamist movement in Arab political systems suggests that these movements are initially excluded and decide to enter the system. The discussions suggest that the price of entry is moderation, which in turn suggests that scholars need to discuss how moderation refers to the system.
- The binary of party and movement and the question of how Islamist movements/parties want to be identified
- The conflict between shari`a and codified law, which acts as the reference in the system in some cases. There are questions about which institution will be responsible for the implementation of shari`a.

Sanjay Ruparelia

Three lessons were learned about Islamist movements:

- Islamist movements vary depending on the political context they operate in. Since these contexts are largely authoritarian, it is more difficult to know what these movements stand for. These movements could be considered democratic to the extend that they work to challenge the regime.
- A lesson learned from South Asia (also an old dictum of Max Weber) suggests that political actors become more radical when they are excluded. The Tamil tigers in Sri Lanka have become increasingly violent because they have not been included.
- Assuming that Islamist movements will default to radicalism, democratic institutions are necessary for constraining them.

Marc Lynch

The theme of moderation was a common thread running through the discussion but the open question remains which indications to use to identify Islamist movements. The presumption of radicalism as a default is based on misnomers. It is not at all clear what the Algerian FIS would have done if it were to take power. There is a set of unhelpful indicators for thinking about moderation:

- Western norms
- Participation in and of itself

It could be useful to look at the debates that Islamist movements themselves are engaged in and who they are arguing against. This issue of takfir is an example.

The argument that more constraints are likely to induce moderation is problematic because it could lead to a moral hazard. Authoritarian constraints, such as those introduced by the Egyptian government in the recent constitutional amendments, can lead to frustration among MB members, which may lead them to question the futility of participation, which in turn risks fragmenting the movement. This means that more constrained democracy might not necessarily be the answer.

Final Comments

- We are at a critical point; we may be reaching a point in which the system's ability to include the movement's where the movements are not able to get beyond a certain number of votes (Brown)
- Some Arab regimes feel that Islamist movements are a threat if they come to power, these movements can the very political institutions that authoritarian regimes have stripped of all weight without any checks (Mecham)
- Those who are against the system in the Arab world are likely to vote for Islamists (Wickham).