

Political Islam: Ready for Engagement?

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WORKING PAPER

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Abstract

The voluminous literature on reform and democratization in the Middle East region reveals a number of facts: a main obstacle to reform are the incumbent regimes that have been trying to resist and circumvent genuine democratic transformations; political reform cannot be credible without integrating moderate Islamists in the process; and external actors (mainly the US and the EU) have not yet formulated a coherent approach to reform that could simultaneously achieve stability and democracy in the region. This paper explores the possibilities and implications of a European engagement with moderate Islamists on democracy promotion in the region. It argues that the EU approach to political reform in the Middle East region needs to be enhanced and linked to realities on the ground. Political reform cannot be effective without the integration of non-violent Islamic groups in a gradual, multifaceted process. It should be highlighted that the process of engagement is a risky one for both the EU and the Islamists, yet both stand to gain from a systematic dialogue on democracy. To reduce the risks, the engagement with political Islam should come within a broader EU strategy for democracy promotion in the region. In fact, what the Islamists would expect from Europe is to maintain a consistent and assertive stand on political reforms that would allow for a genuine representation of the popular will through peaceful means. In this regard, a number of questions seem pertinent. Does the EU really need to engage political Islam in democratic reforms? Is political Islam ready for engagement and will it be willing to engage? How can an engagement policy be formulated on the basis of plausible implementation with minimal risks to the interests of the parties involved?

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1. Does Europe Need to Engage Islamists in its Reform Promotion Policy?

One of the recommendations of the final report of the EU Strategic Partnership with the Mediterranean and the Middle East called for an EU engagement “with non-violent political organizations and civil society movements at all levels in society, with such engagement open to all organizations committed to non-violent and democratic means.”¹ This provision opens the possibility for an EU interaction with moderate Islamist groups that do not espouse violence but peaceful means to achieve their goals. This is a commendable departure from past policies that have marginalized and overlooked key players in the political process in the region. For almost a decade the EU has been engaged and focusing its various initiatives at official levels (civil servants, ministerial summits, the Arab League), in addition to some elements of Arab civil society. An underpinning goal behind these initiatives is the promotion of a developed, prosperous, peaceful, and secure region. Normally, the attainment of these goals will reflect positively on addressing the real concerns of the EU: security, immigration problems, demographic changes, organized crime, and terrorism. So far, the approach that has been implemented is overly cautious and to some

¹ Commission of the European Communities, Report on The EU’s Strategic Partnership with the Mediterranean and the Middle East, *Euromed Report*, issue no. 78 (June 24, 2004).

extent non-comprehensive. It has gone to some length to accommodate the concerns of the EU partners. To avoid being perceived as interventionist, the EU proposals over-emphasize gradualism, working within existing instruments, no regime change, reform from within, active consultation with “our partners,” and coordination with the US, the UN, and other external actors. When it comes to the much popularly-needed issue of democracy, the language that is usually adopted refers more to the rule of law and human rights, without a tangible and consistent connection between these important issues and economic or financial provisions to countries in the region that constantly violate human rights, the rule of law, and the electoral process. Surprisingly, some of the EU reports went as far as adopting the official language of the partners: reform should not be imposed from outside; each country should be given the opportunity to move at pace in accordance with its willingness to engage; and the approach should be long-term and pragmatic.² It is quite understandable that the EU should continue working with regimes in the region to attain its goals, but for economic, social, and political reform to be effective a more comprehensive approach needs to be considered. Also, the EU needs to maintain a position on these pertinent issues that is distinguishable from that of the regimes in the area and from other external players.

² Ibid.

Many analysts have expressed concerns about engaging Islamists in the process of political reform. They advocate exclusion or at best containment in order to maintain stability in the region. This argument maintains that Islamists are not genuinely democratic and only use democratic opportunities to win elections by exploiting the popular religious sentiments of their Muslim voters. Once in power, they will use the legislative process to change the rules of the game and restrict public and private freedoms. An Islamist-led regime represents a threat to relations with the West and to peace in the region. At this point, a clear distinction should be made between militant Islamists who are against the system and resort to violence to achieve their goals and moderates who are committed to non-violence and constitutional and legal means. The first type is certainly a minority among Islamist organizations and does not enjoy a large following, while the latter represents a vast majority and a mainstream trend within the Islamic movements.

To respond to these arguments, a quick characterization of the state of democratization and political reform in the region seems pertinent. The purpose is to demonstrate that the problem of transformation and democracy is mainly structural. Over the past decades, the region has been moving slowly towards some political opening, leaving it situated between fully-developed democracy and full-fledged autocracy. It is in a state of flux. Real democratic transformations require the concerted efforts and cooperation of key players: regimes, moderate liberals, and moderate Islamists. These forces are

not equal in power. The ruling regimes are the strongest, yet most reluctant to introduce meaningful changes. Beyond cosmetic reforms, they have blocked any effective structural transformation. The liberal secularist and moderate Islamist are divided and distrust each other. The liberal secularist opposition is unpopular and ineffective. They have been unable to gather a constituency that can match the popularity of the Islamists. They might feel closer to and safer with a regime that at least shares their secular orientation than to an Islamic force that might turn out to be their antithesis. The moderate Islamist opposition, despite its declared commitment to democratic processes and the rules of the game, is regularly harassed in many countries in the region and prevented from legal participation and attaining political maturity within the system. Moderate Islamists need to operate legally and publicly and should have the opportunity to engage directly with other political forces to be able to learn through the process, test their programs in light of other actors' interests and agendas, and accordingly modify their programs through the process of interaction.

Here a possible EU role could be exercised. The EU calls for political reform in the region as an approach to achieving stability and development. Political reform should be sought gradually, but comprehensively as well. The EU does not need to be viewed as attempting to flirt with the Islamists, nor does it want to maintain extremist positions by excluding the possibility of interaction with the Islamists over issues of reform. This is precisely where the difficulty lies. An EU engagement with the Islamists could

offend the ruling regimes and the liberal secularist trends in the region. Meanwhile, the exclusion of Islamists would reconfirm doubts that the EU prefers a pro-status quo and stability policy, at the expense of democracy promotion, and that reform would be carefully engineered to always produce partners that the EU feels more comfortable dealing with, even if these partners are not truly democratic or representative of the true values of society.

To complicate an already difficult situation further, political reform in the region cannot be effective and credible without the integration of the moderate Islamists in the systems of government. This process could be curtailed as long as possible, but that would come at the cost of weakening the moderates within the Islamic organizations, enhancing the radicals, and excluding a political force that can eventually produce a working and popularly accepted formula for development and stability that does not necessarily contradict the EU's main strategic objectives: a developed, secure, peaceful, and stable region. Out of the three players identified above (entrenched regimes, liberal secularists, and moderate Islamists), the Islamists seem best placed to achieve a working synthesis that would address three major deficits in the region: the problem of identity, development and economic growth, and contextualization of democratic values.

To resolve this dilemma, the EU should maintain a comprehensive approach to reform that does not exclude any democratically committed force, including moderate Islamists. The engagement of

the Islamists thus comes within a broader framework of reform. The EU needs to work on providing an effective environment for democracy to thrive and for political reforms to produce tangible fruit. The promotion of such an environment requires major structural changes and specific policy measures. Analysts agree that the Middle East suffers from a clear democracy deficit. The state is well entrenched in the political, social, and economic spheres and still is the main regulator of almost all aspects of the individual's life. The constitutions are either dated, deficient, or simply disregarded; the rule of law is not respected; human rights are often violated; the legal parties are unpopular and the popular parties are illegal; the electoral process is rampant with irregularities, manipulation, and gerrymandering; harassment and repression of effective opposition still goes unabated; the state of emergency stifles political association and the freedom of expression; the restrictions on party formation prevent the emergence of meaningful political contestation; the ruling regimes prevent the formation of a viable counter-elite through systematic repression, marginalization, and co-optation. These are all problems that might not be adequately addressed by just stressing the rule of law and respect of human rights. They need major structural changes.

The EU should be moderately vocal but firm and consistent with the ruling regimes and urge them to allow immediate structural changes. Some of these changes may include: introducing constitutional amendments to make the constitution conducive to promoting a democratic environment; enhancing the legislature to enable

it to have real legislative and monitoring powers; removing restrictions on the formation of political parties; providing guarantees for free and transparent elections; granting women the right to vote and the right of full participation; ending the extra-legal processes that restrict political participation and expression and that undermine individual and public rights (emergency laws and military tribunals). Within this framework, the EU engagement of Islamists becomes one out of a series of measures that ensure acceptable and equitable political opportunities for all.

At the policy level, the EU has devised a series of agreements, policies, and action plans with its Mediterranean partners. Aside from the negotiating state officials, highly specialized experts, and recipient NGOs, the average citizens hardly feel that they are touched by them. To many, this is politics as usual between EU countries concerned about immigration, terrorism, and security, on the one hand, and faltering regimes keen on their stability and continuity, on the other. This is one business that keeps the latter afloat. Democracy promotion seems to be the weakest link in this relationship, though it is no less important than economic and social development and should be highlighted.

2. Are Islamists Ready for Engagement in Democracy Promotion?

To avoid normative judgments and over-generalizations, the Islamists' commitment to democratic reforms should be assessed on concrete criteria: attitudes and practices. The response to the issue of democracy among Islamic thinkers over the past decades has not been uniform. One discerns three main trends. The first rejects democracy as an alien concept whose adoption threatens the identity of Muslims and resurrects painful memories of Western imperialism and colonial cultural and political domination of Arabs and Muslims. In this context one could understand the views of Abu al-A`la al-Mawdudi, Sayyid Qutb and their followers, the Islamic Group in Egypt, al-Qaeda, or Ali Belhaj in Algeria. The second trend sees democracy as currently practiced in the Arab world as the only means for political survival and, if fortunate enough, for participation in the system. This is the case of the Association of Justice and Benevolence in Morocco, which is not necessarily violent. The third trend regards the democratic system of government (institutions and processes) as compatible with the principles of Islam. The following section focuses on the last trend, which represents the mainstream Islamic movements.

2.1 Moderate Political Islam

Despite the fact that moderate Islamist movements and parties have not abandoned their objective of establishing an Islamic state, they advocate gradualism and working through legal channels to achieve their goals. They demonstrated adherence to the democratic process as they competed in local and legislative elections, yet, in most cases, as independents or in alliance with other political parties. Moderate Islamist organizations recognize that working from within the system grants them more opportunities for success than resorting to violent means. They adopt certain guidelines with regard to their involvement in the political process. Some of these guidelines include the recognition of the existing political regimes and the institutions of the state; respect for the rules and regulations that govern the political process; rejection of violence; willingness to work in public and gain some form of official recognition; and willingness to make alliances and coalitions with other political parties that do not share their orientations. These movements constitute the vast majority of Islamic organizations and attract a large following. Examples of such movements are found in the Justice and Development Party and the Justice and Benevolence Society in Morocco; the Renaissance Movement in Tunisia; the Islamic Salvation Front, Hamas (The Movement for Peaceful Society), the National Reform Movement and al-Nahda in Algeria; the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Jordan; The Reform Party in Yemen.

The moderate orientations of these organizations have been justified on ideological and pragmatic basis. They acknowledge that the constitutions of many Arab countries define the state as Muslim and some countries have included the shari`a as a source or the source for legislation. Therefore, these regimes cannot be judged as non-Muslim and violence cannot be applied against them, but rather reform and Islamization of politics and society. From a pragmatic perspective, attempts to confront the state through violent means have proven unsuccessful and disastrous. Moderate Islamist movements have come to the realization that they can make more political gains and achieve more success through the electoral process and participating in the system. For the past two decades they have been contesting elections either as recognized political organizations, or in most cases, as independents or in coalition with other political parties. In democratic processes, moderate Islamists have performed well. They have achieved electoral successes in local, national, and professional association elections in Morocco, Algeria, Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, Kuwait, Yemen, Turkey, Pakistan, Indonesia, Nigeria, and Malaysia.

These attempts at co-existence and accommodation continued and developed over the past decades. They evolved from simply succumbing to the distorted parameters for political participation to acceptance of democratic values that should guide the entire system and regulate the relationship between the Islamists and other political forces in society. Moderate Islamists are increasingly accepting political

pluralism, viewing it as a natural and inevitable evolution of society. The majority now recognize the right of secular parties, liberal or communist, to legally exist and freely express their political views in an Islamic state, provided that they do not have the undermining of the Islamic system as an objective.³ There is also a growing acceptance of the concept of transfer of power. Many of these parties do not now perceive themselves as the sole representatives of Islam or strip other forces in society from their Islamic identity.⁴ Some Islamic political parties have matured within the political game as they often enter into alliances and coalitions with rival political parties to achieve specific short term goals and advance the process of democratization or draw concessions from the regime.

A noteworthy evolution was the Reform Initiative of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in March 2004. This initiative is extremely important because it represents a turning point for the

³ This practice is not alien to several Western democracies that consider some norms or fundamentals as immutable and do not permit any force in society to change them.

⁴ The Islamic Tendency Movement, now al-Nahda, stated in a communiqué announcing the establishment of the movement in June 1981 that:

The people are the only power which can accept and support any political party. We do not oppose at all the existence of any political movement whose ideology may be radically against us, including the communist party. From the Islamic point of view, we have no right to interpose between the people and those whom the people choose and elect. *Le Maghreb* (June 13, 1981), quoted in Fathi Osman, The Muslim World: Issues and Challenges (California: Islamic Center of Southern California, 1989), p. 119.

See also Fahmy Huwaidy, "Fiqh Tadawul al-Sulta," (The Jurisprudence of the Transfer of Power), Al-Ahram (September 8, 1992), p. 7.

Muslim Brotherhood and will certainly affect the orientation of its affiliated organizations throughout the Muslim world. The Initiative proposed reforms in 13 areas. At the level of political reform, the initiative unequivocally confirms the MB's commitment to a republican, parliamentary, constitutional, and democratic system in Egypt within the principles of Islam. It calls for other political parties to adhere to a national charter that calls, among other things, for recognizing the people as the source of all authority, respecting the principle of the transfer of power through clean and free elections, confirming the freedom of belief and expression, guaranteeing the freedom of the formation of political parties, putting a limit to the term of the president, and enhancing the independence of the judiciary.

2. 2 Islamic NGOs:

Another important dimension of the potency of Islamic activism in the region is the Islamic NGOs. These are a history-old phenomenon and are widely spread throughout the Arab and Muslim countries. There are no accurate figures of the numbers for these organizations. But out of the over 16,000 NGOs in Egypt, at least 32% are religious organizations (Muslim and Coptic). This percentage should be higher because many additional religiously-oriented NGOs are not registered with the Ministry of Social Affairs under religious names, but as simply charitable or service providing organizations. One should also expect this percentage to be higher in the Gulf countries. Most of these Islamic organizations are classified as charitable and as service delivery

organizations. They follow the traditional pattern of providing material or financial handouts to the needy, care for widows and orphans, and subsidized religious services (hajj, umra) for the poor. They also provide basic medical, educational, cultural, and religious services. Few are involved in advocacy activities. This emphasis on charity work and services reflects a general pattern of the nature of the NGOs in the region. In 2002, the number of Arab NGOs was estimated at 230,000. Out of this number, charitable NGOs constituted 50%; the service delivery, 25%; and the development-oriented 25%. In other words, charity and service organizations constituted 75% of all NGOs.

The EU has been providing support for NGOs as part of its policy to strengthen and empower the civil society. To an ordinary observer from the region, the advocacy NGOs, which represent a small segment of the NGOs (in Egypt, for example, they constitute 0.4% of the total number of NGOs), seem to be getting most of the EU attention. They are becoming the regular 'customers' of EU aid to promote civil society. Cynics dub them as conference-promotion NGOs as their efforts in participating in conferences abroad seem more tangible than in achieving real results on the ground.⁵

Islamic NGOs seem to have the longest history and experience in social services. They operate at grass-roots levels, dispense services to large segments of the population, and work actively in

poor areas. Because of their religious orientation and objectives, they get the support and trust of donors, who consider their contributions as a social, as well as a religious duty. However, Islamic NGOs follow traditional patterns of management and orientations. They certainly need to develop a new vision and expand their areas of activities to become contributors to the civil society at large, and not only to some of its segments.

⁵ Figures obtained from Amani Qandil, *The Third Annual Report of the Arab NGOs* (Cairo: The Arab Network for NGOs, 2004).

3. Towards A Framework for Engagement

When I raised the issue of the possibility of an EU-Islamist engagement with some well-educated Islamists, there was a clear sense of skepticism. For them, this sounded completely discordant with current EU policies in the region. Some relevant remarks were raised: Europe favors governments, states, and like-minded NGOs in its engagements; Europe is interested in engagement to curb the threats of Islamic fundamentalism at home and abroad; Europe has maintained a wrong approach to political Islam viewing it as a source of instability, terrorism, and a threat; the EU cannot be serious about this engagement because it would simply undermine its relationships with the ruling autocratic elites in the region; and finally, this engagement would endanger moderate Islamists as it will provide their adversaries with a strong argument to discredit them.

Obviously, all these concerns, real or imagined, are reflective of a long history of mistrust of European and Western designs – the fear of a “hidden agenda” lying behind their declared intentions. The same way the West has concerns about the intentions of Islamists, the Islamists harbor doubts about the EU commitment to a meaningful engagement.

This should not be taken as a foregone conclusion. Despite mutual doubts, both sides would benefit from cooperative engagement. Through engagement with the EU moderate

Islamists would gain some form of recognition; learn political and negotiation skills; present their views and concerns directly to the Europeans instead of being represented by “experts”; and have the opportunity to convince the EU to stress to the ruling elites the need for accommodation of non-violent organizations. Likewise, Europe would benefit from opening channels with political Islam that could be useful in the long run. The EU engagement with moderate Islamists in the region will resonate among the Muslims in Europe; moderate Islamists can act as a bridge between European states and their Muslim communities; through direct engagement, they will be exposed to European concerns and appreciate them; and could possibly moderate their positions on certain issues.

Building mutual confidence takes time and is not immune to reversals. For this reason, the process of engagement with Islamists has to be gradual and multi-faceted, yet candid. The parties that the EU should engage with are the non-violent Islamist organizations and Islamic-based NGOs. Initial focus should be placed on the Islamic NGOs, that are an influential part of civil society and have an apolitical agenda. Most of these organizations are in a dire need of upgrading their administrative, logistical and technical skills. They also need to learn how to broaden the scope of their activities and evolve from charity and service delivery structures to development, empowering, and advocacy organizations.

The EU can provide assistance to these types of NGOs. This should not necessarily come in the

form of direct financial aid. Most of these organizations draw their financial support from Muslim donors and would not accept European financial assistance. However, they might welcome the idea of the EU providing administrative and technical training. The EU does not have to devise new instruments for engaging these organizations, but can accommodate them within its existing instruments. However, they need to be identified and surveyed first. This task could be assigned to independent research centers in the region (and not to existing aid recipients or anti-Islamist NGOs).

As for the moderate political Islamic movements, it is important that they see some role for the EU in helping them integrate into the legal and legitimate frameworks of their respective countries and have more space for political interaction. This of course does not mean that the EU has to intervene on their behalf, but simply to demonstrate consistency in expecting all parties, regimes included, to commit to the rule of law and democratic principles. That alone would represent a serious confidence building measure in the eyes of Islamists. The EU and moderate Islamists could establish channels of communication to gain first hand exposure to each others' views and concerns. It should be expected that regimes and other elements antagonistic to an Islamist-European dialogue will attempt to manipulate and jeopardize these contacts. Therefore, a top-level decision is needed on both sides to maintain their engagement as a proper policy for interaction, and not yield to pressure and suspend it.

Political Islam has clear cultural and social dimensions. These dimensions are important components of the EU-Mediterranean partnership policies and the relations between the North and South. Many Islamists, Islamic thinkers, and Islamic oriented think-tanks have been trying to formulate intellectual responses to some of the current challenging issues of identity, modernization, democracy and pluralism, human rights, globalization, and cultural encounters. Some of these ideas deserve to be heard. The EU could invite moderate Islamists to some EU functions, conferences, workshops, advisory groups, and discussions dealing with the issues of religious and cultural dialogues, educational programs, democracy and reform promotion, identity within Europe and the Mediterranean, security, globalization, media, etc.

The EU needs to learn the Islamists' views on the existing agreements and protocols with the Mediterranean countries. It also needs them to present their current and future vision regarding specific issues in the relationship between Europe and the Muslim world. This cannot be achieved unless a policy of engagement with moderate Islamists is pursued.

4. Conclusion

For the past three decades, political Islam has been on the rise. Surprisingly, a concrete and positive strategy for dealing with political Islam has been absent. It is time for the West to entertain the possibilities, if not the necessity, of cohabiting with Islamic regimes that would reflect the dominant belief system of their societies and could bridge the existing gap between the ruling regimes and their populations. However, history took a different turn with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the West's need to conjure up a new peril, and the doomsday prophecies of the clash of civilizations. And this prophecy was fulfilled through the catastrophic and catalyzing events of 9/11. The rest of the story is known to all. Some have even argued that the current policies of a world-wide war against "Islamic terrorism" and the isolation and containment of political Islam is working well and should continue. Furthermore, it does not seem that Islamists are likely to come to power in any Arab country in the near future; and therefore there is no need for engaging with political Islam, particularly given that such a policy would antagonize pro-Western regimes and anti-Islamist elements.⁶ Clearly, this is a recipe for maintaining a failing status quo and the continuation of a confrontation between the West and moderate Islamists. More importantly, it has no guarantees for success in the long run. A new approach of engagement with moderate Islamists should be pursued.

The EU's engagement with moderate Islamists should come within a broader framework for democracy promotion in the region. Democracy promotion has to have the same saliency as social and economic reform. At some point, the EU's strategy for political reform should evolve and address structural changes to create a conducive environment for democracy. This will give a fair chance to all actors committed to democratic practices. In the meantime, the EU should avoid imposing certain values as universal or necessary preconditions for democracy, but rather allow local players to contextualize democratic values within their own environments. In this way, democratic values can develop deep roots.

Islam manifests itself in various ways and at diverse levels. Moderate Islamists and Islamic NGOs are only two of such manifestations. Moderate Islam is also visible in research centers, independent Islamist intellectuals, Islamist-feminist organizations, economic and financial institutions, journals and periodicals, internet services, and satellite channels. This paper has focused primarily on moderate political Islam and Islamic-oriented NGOs as possible candidates for positive engagement with the EU. Islamists have doubts about EU intentions, even-handedness, and effectiveness in promoting political reforms, while the EU has doubts about the Islamists' commitment to democratic values and practices.

⁶ Policy Watch, No. 907, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, October 11, 2004.

The process of building mutual confidence will take time and many trials, but it must begin. One suggestion made here was to begin an engagement with the Islamic NGOs:

- identify and survey them;
- help them to acquire administrative and technical skills; and
- encourage them to broaden the scope of their activities and orientations.

This could be achieved through already existing EU structures and programs aiming at the enhancement of the civil society in the region.

As for political Islam, the EU should act on its declared approach of engaging with non-violent political organizations. The EU could achieve this through:

- establishing direct channels of communication and dialogue over issues that concern both sides;
- providing opportunities for the participation of Islamist elements in EU functions that discuss cultural, religious, educational, and democracy promotion issues.

While a difficult enterprise, including moderate Islamists in these processes could prove one of the biggest boosts to the credibility and effectiveness of EU reform strategies in the region.

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