

# Islamism at a Crossroads?

## The Diffusion of Political Islam in the Arab World

Peter Mandaville

How should we think about the likely future of Islamism as an ideology and a political agenda? Only a few years ago, Islamist parties looked certain to be the primary beneficiaries of the Arab uprisings and its associated upheaval. The Muslim Brotherhood and Ennahda seemed set to consolidate their political dominance in Egypt and Tunisia, respectively, with similarly aligned groups emerging as prominent players in other transitional and conflict settings such as Libya, Syria, and Yemen. Today, however, the situation seems to have turned on its head. In Egypt, the Freedom and Justice Party government of Mohamed Morsi was removed from power by force in 2013, the Muslim Brotherhood criminalized as an organization, and the current Egyptian government has been working to systematically eradicate the movement as a social force. In Tunisia, Ennahda relinquished power in 2014 in the face of a dangerously polarizing political environment, only to fail at the ballot box in subsequent elections.

Beyond the question of how Islamists have fared in individual countries, support for political Islam has emerged as one of the defining issues in a new axis of geopolitical division in the Middle East. The United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt have branded the Muslim Brotherhood trend as terrorism and pursued a zero-tolerance policy toward the movement. Qatar and Turkey, conversely, have taken a more sympathetic stance toward political Islam. Furthermore, the trauma and violence associated with the emergence of the Islamic State in 2014 has potentially tainted even mainstream expressions of political Islam in the eyes of populations across the region. In many respects we are presented with an image today of an Islamism that is embattled and, if not defeated, very much on its heels.

But simple narratives of political Islam's decline mask a far more complex reality. If one looks around the Middle East today, the status and fortunes of Islamist groups varies widely.

While the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood is indeed facing a level of political oppression arguably more intense than it has ever seen in its ninety years of existence, its recent experience is not indicative of political Islam's standing in the Arab world more broadly. In Morocco, the Parti de la Justice et du Développement—a political party with roots in a social movement inspired by the Muslim Brotherhood trend—has led the government since 2011. In Jordan, the Islamic Action Front and other Islamists hold the largest bloc of opposition seats in parliament, while in Kuwait the local Muslim Brotherhood affiliate, Hadas, reentered parliament after years of boycotting elections. And in Tunisia, despite setbacks in 2014, Ennahda performed very strongly in local elections in 2018 and in 2019 became the largest party in parliament. Although it is important to temper our interpretation of these successes—the palace stills holds the real power in Morocco, Jordan's government has co-opted many Islamists, and the electorate's enthusiasm for Ennahda is far from clear—it is evident that Islamism in the Middle East is far from being a spent force. In at least one country, Turkey, Islam-friendly (if not conventionally “Islamist”) forces have mostly retained their already-dominant position, with Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the Justice and Development Party (or AK Party) emerging in that country's 2019 presidential and parliamentary elections—even if the country's failing economy and losses in key municipal elections have revealed some underlying fragility in the ruling party's hegemony.

Factors such as electoral performance and levels of political repression are certainly relevant, but they are also highly situational and, given the enormous volatility that characterizes Middle East politics today, do not necessarily tell the whole story. The purpose of this chapter is to assess these shorter-term, contingent political developments against longer-term trends in the evolution of Islamism as an ideological project and political agenda in order to discern the forces shaping possible futures for political Islam. In short, this analysis suggests that even before the watershed events of 2003 and 2010–2011, the phenomenon of political Islam had been undergoing a longer-term sociological evolution. Although some of the structural features of the “New Middle East” may adversely affect the near-term political fortunes of Islamists, it is clear that Islamism remains a fixture within the societies of the region, and moreover, one that is perhaps more malleable and adaptable than some observers think.

## Political Opportunity Structure

Which broad factors are likely to determine the future of political Islam in the Middle East?

Proponents of social movement theory have long recognized the importance of changes in political opportunity structures as one of the most important factors bearing on the success of sociopolitical mobilization.<sup>1</sup> Simply put, a shift in political opportunity structure refers to a change in the political environment that enables social mobilization (including by opposition or other previously excluded groups). Such a change may be created by an all-encompassing and tectonically significant event, such as a political revolution or regime collapse, or by less dramatic developments, such as a tactical decision by an incumbent regime to stop oppressing a particular opposition group, or an intensification of competition among ruling elites. Previous examples of change in political opportunity structure that have had a significant impact on the political fortunes of Islamists include the collapse of the Pahlavi dynasty in Iran in 1979 in the face of popular revolution, decisions by the palace in both Morocco and Jordan in the 1990s to try to co-opt and “domesticate” Islamist parties rather than cracking down on them, the Arab uprisings of 2010–2011 that fundamentally changed the political landscape in numerous countries across the Middle East, and, of course, the 2013 coup in Egypt that removed Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood from power.

Given the fluid and unsettled nature of politics in the Middle East at present, shifts in political opportunity structure likely represent one of the most important factors determining short-term developments in Islamism. The volatility of Arab politics may present sudden and unanticipated opportunities for Islamists to grow in prominence or increase their political power in some settings, whereas similar dynamics in other countries may lead to a diminution in their political standing. Looking across the Middle East and North Africa as a whole, it is possible to identify three broad categories of countries in which the ebbs and flows of political opportunity structure are likely to affect Islamist political fortunes in particular ways in the near term.

First is a situation characterized by Islamist stagnation, in which the likelihood of significant shifts in political opportunity structure changing the status of Islamists is very low. The countries in question—Morocco, Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, and most of the Gulf Cooperation Council—tend to be settings characterized by relative political stability, a societal predisposition to avoid political upheaval, and/or entrenched oppression of Islamism. Islamists in these contexts either have very little to no social and political space in which to operate (and little prospect of gaining more anytime soon), or, as in the cases of the monarchies of Morocco and Jordan, have entered increasingly institutionalized bargains with regimes such that they have become

effectively denuded of oppositional impulses.

The second category consists of those countries marked by gradual Islamist ascendance. In these countries domestic political developments, coupled with external influences, are likely to produce greater space for Islamist groups to shape political outcomes in the coming months and years. Interestingly, the countries in this category—Tunisia, Lebanon, and Iraq—represent two very different models that can produce positive momentum for Islamists. In Tunisia, Ennahda lost the last parliamentary election in 2014 but stayed within the governing coalition led by Nidaa Tounes and Béji Caïd Essebsi. By remaining in the political mainstream, Ennahda seems well positioned to benefit from the unpopularity of Nidaa Tounes at the next general election—even if, in an effort to affirm their establishment credentials, some of their policy positions seem overly sympathetic to pre-2011 ways of doing business.<sup>2</sup> In Lebanon, conversely, there is a situation in which a perpetually weak government and impasse between the main secularist factions allow a well-resourced and organized Islamist group to wield political influence well beyond its electoral strength. That country's 2018 parliamentary election only further consolidated Hezbollah's position as chief kingmaker in Lebanese politics. In Iraq, Moqtada al-Sadr's surprisingly strong showing in the 2018 elections demonstrates a similar dynamic in which a population disillusioned by a political establishment unable to make progress on the country's pressing needs turns to a relative outsider to shake things up.

Finally, there are those countries in which there is a high potential for Islamist wildcard effects, depending on the direction and outcome of ongoing conflicts or civil unrest. In most of the countries in this category—Libya, Syria, and Yemen—Islamist groups were either prominent in politics before the conflict (Yemen) or have emerged as key power brokers in the context of political upheaval and warfare (Libya and Syria). While the precise role and standing of Islamists post-conflict remains unclear and likely is subject to the terms of any eventual political settlement, local Islamists are likely to be key players if and when the dust settles in Syria and Libya, whereas Yemen's Muslim Brotherhood affiliate, Islah, has lost significant support in the context of that country's civil war but is still likely to have a role in any future government.<sup>3</sup>

At a more mundane level, the politics of most countries that fall into the aforementioned categories are likely to see ongoing instances of cat-and-mouse politics between Islamist groups and ruling regimes. This refers to the day-to-day game of give-and-take as Islamists, secular groups, and regimes react to one another, form temporary tactical alliances around certain issues

even as they continue to vociferously disagree about others, and generally jockey for position—in short, the general horse-trading of politics. The net impact of this kind of activity over time on the political standing of Islamists is broadly neutral. On the one hand, it functions to institutionalize and “normalize” the participation of Islamists in everyday politics, but on the other hand, it also tends to incentivize Islamists to assume increasingly centrist positions that, over time, make their political brand less and less distinctive.

A political opportunity structure-related dynamic more likely to have a broad, systemic impact on Islamist fortunes going forward comes from the aforementioned regional struggle between powerful blocs of pro- and anti-Islamist countries. For nearly twenty years, Qatar and then Turkey have broadly supported *ikhwanist*-aligned movements, parties, media, and civil society throughout the Middle East.<sup>4</sup> Alarmed by the rapid rise in political strength of these groups after the Arab uprisings, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia—both of which perceived the Muslim Brotherhood as an existential threat to their respective ruling dynasties—have, since 2012, undertaken a broad-based campaign to discredit, neutralize, criminalize, and generally oppress even mainstream, nonviolent expressions of Islamism. Abu Dhabi’s crown prince Mohammed bin Zayed and, to a lesser extent, Saudi Arabia’s crown prince Muhammad bin Salman have emerged as the champions and chief stewards of anti-*ikhwanist* statecraft. They have provided direct financial support to regional governments that have taken a hard line against Islamists (e.g., Abdel Fattah al-Sisi’s Egypt) and have encouraged—mostly to no avail—key global allies such as the United States and the United Kingdom to declare the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization.

Going forward, the intensity of the pro- and anti-Islamist divide in the Middle East and its overall impact on Islamist fortunes is likely to depend on two factors. First, there is the question of the other important geopolitical issue at play within the spat that pits the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia against Turkey and Qatar, namely Iran. Saudi Arabia and (secondarily) the UAE have viewed Iran as a direct security threat, whereas Turkey and Qatar have taken a more cordial posture toward Tehran (even as both countries oppose its role in Syria). Because the issues that divide the likes of Riyadh and Doha at present are to some extent a package, any progress on one of them—such as the overall trend in Gulf Cooperation Council–Iran relations—is likely to influence other elements within the larger basket, such as the posture that Abu Dhabi and Riyadh strike with respect to Islamism more broadly. Second, the attitude of

the UAE and, especially, Saudi Arabia toward *ikhwanist* groups in the coming years is also likely to be governed by the importance of these groups for achieving Riyadh's desired outcome in a number of regional conflicts, including Yemen, Syria, Libya, and Palestine. If Muslim Brotherhood-linked groups in these countries turn out to be important players for brokering the necessary cease-fires and creating stable political coalitions, then Riyadh is likely to back away from the excesses of its current anti-Islamist campaign and to encourage its allies in the Gulf Cooperation Council to do the same.

## Popular Attitudes toward Islamists, Religion, and Politics

To what extent do popular perceptions of and attitudes toward Islamists tell us about possible futures for political Islam? Here we find a very mixed picture. As the performance of Islamists in elections throughout the region in recent years suggests, the situation varies from country to country. Polling data on this question are difficult to come by, not least of all because many governments in the region are sensitive about survey researchers asking questions about support for Islamism. Using proxy indicators does not get us very far. For example, Pew Research Center data on levels of support for sharia in the Middle East in 2013 found that significant majorities support making Islamic law the official law of the land. However, in several countries the relevant percentages are clearly far higher than are levels of support for Islamists, meaning that sharia supporters have been overpolled or that those who favor Islamic law stay away from the ballot box, or—as is most likely the case—that many who express support for sharia vote for non-Islamist parties.<sup>5</sup>

Several polls, including Pew and the Arab Barometer, ask about levels of support for religious leaders playing a role in government; the Arab Barometer survey shows a clear trend of decreasing support in recent years for religious leaders intervening in politics.<sup>6</sup> Again, however, this does not serve as a meaningful proxy for political Islam, as most respondents likely understand “religious leaders” to refer to religious scholars or clerics and view those actors as separate and distinct from Islamist leaders and politicians. Indeed, many Islamists have criticized the role played by religious scholars in, for example, lending support to authoritarian regimes, so it is likely that the described trend includes many Islamists.

Levels of popular support for Islamist parties and movements, however, is the wrong

metric to track in the first place, particularly if the goal is to understand better the more systemic factors and trends shaping prospects for political Islam. Political opinion polls are, after all, notoriously contingent, situational, and volatile. We are perhaps better off asking broader questions about the presence and role of Islam in political discourse in the Middle East and about how peoples' understandings about Islamism and political Islam may be changing.

Part of the challenge in assessing this question arises from a tendency in the study of political Islam to focus primarily on specific organizations, movements, and parties, and the things they say and do. So it becomes relatively easy for observers to explore attitudes of political Islamists toward society (using their statements, behavior, and political strategies) but very difficult for them to know much about popular attitudes toward political Islam beyond electoral performance and occasional opinion polls. Adding to the analytic confusion is the fact that some prominent Islamists have openly questioned the utility of Islamism as an appropriate label or description of what they stand for. A trend started by Turkish leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has seen Islamist parties with roots in the Muslim Brotherhood tradition progressively distancing themselves from the label "Islamist." Starting in the mid-1990s, a discourse of *wasatiyya* (centrism) emerged as an alternative to classical Islamist formulations, most prominently in the Hizb al-Wasat faction that broke away from the old-guard leadership of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. Muslim Brotherhood clerics such as Yusuf al-Qaradawi adopted the same language to describe a religio-political trend rooted in Islam but thoroughly pragmatic in its orientation.<sup>7</sup> A different formula proved more successful, however—the "justice and development" trend started by the Moroccan Islamists and later adopted by Erdoğan when he staged his own breakaway from Turkey's old-guard Islamic bloc. Part of the reason for the success of the "justice and development" brand—one since replicated in other countries, including Indonesia—lies in the fact that it eschews the studied vagueness of *wasatiyya* in favor of terminology that gestures toward an actual political platform—"justice," connoting lack of corruption; "development," economic growth. Thus, the phrase captures in a pat formula the two leading concerns of many voters in the Middle East.

Erdoğan was the first prominent Islamist leader to signal a new strategic orientation for Islamist parties when he suggested that the AK Party could not be accurately described as an Islamist party but was rather a socially conservative party comprising public servants whose sense of morality was rooted in their religious convictions.<sup>8</sup> He urged observers of the AK Party

to view it as the Muslim equivalent of the Christian democracy movement in Europe; in other words, the religious referent points here to a broad cultural-ethical orientation rather than a specific governing agenda.

Just over a decade later, the leader of Tunisia's Ennahda, Rashid Ghannouchi, announced at the party's 2016 annual congress that members of Ennahda should no longer think of themselves as Islamists but as "Muslim democrats." Ghannouchi's announcement reflected more than a shift in labeling, however; a directive to separate the religious activities of the Ennahda social movement from the work of the political party accompanied it. On one level, Ghannouchi was seeking to reassure skeptical secularists in Tunisia who harbored lingering fears that Ennahda would use its political position at some point to press a religious agenda. On another, this shift is consistent with an emerging pattern in contemporary Islamist thought that, at least implicitly, recognizes religion and politics as separate domains. In both Morocco and Egypt, for example, leaders from the Justice and Development Party and the Muslim Brotherhood have argued in recent years that it is possible for members of specific Islamist movements to create and/or support multiple political parties, including those of non-Islamists.<sup>9</sup> For Ghannouchi, this development reflects a pragmatic approach long present in his writings whereby ideas and solutions from non-Islamic sources or ideologies are perfectly acceptable so long as the effects they yield are compatible with the broad objectives of Islamic law. Translated into politics, this would permit a "Muslim democrat" to collaborate with or, following Ennahda's experience, participate in a coalition with political groups of varying ideological orientations to jointly devise practical solutions to everyday problems unencumbered by a separate proselytizing agenda. With respect to the question of sharia law, for example, this position enables a party such as Ennahda to maintain its commitment to creating laws that are sharia compliant instead of sharia based laws that derive from a specific and separate body of rules that needs to be progressively implemented over time.

## Looking Ahead: Islamist Trends and Futures

When looking at how changing political opportunity structures, intra-Islamist dynamics, and shifts in popular attitudes toward Islam in politics have played out in various national settings in the Middle East over the past two decades, it becomes possible to discern a number of trends that hold clues to the future evolution of political Islam. They are Islamist self-limiting, internal



factionalization and existential crisis, and a shifting sociology of Islamist affiliation.

In terms of the first, it seems likely that in the near to medium term, political opportunity structures in the Middle East will be, by and large, unfavorable to Islamists. At present, there are arguably only two countries in the Middle East in which Islamists are able to compete for power relatively openly and on an equal footing with other political actors under conditions of “normal” politics: Tunisia and Algeria (where an absence of meaningful political competition means that Islamists face no particular disadvantage compared to other groups). All other settings in which Islamist groups and parties are to be found involve one or more of the following: subjugation of all political actors to monarchy (Morocco, Jordan, Gulf Cooperation Council); a ban on Islamist mobilization and political activity (Egypt); active or recent civil war involving the suspension of political institutions (Libya, Syria, Yemen);<sup>10</sup> or the presence of a very weak or failed central government dealing with fundamental issues of social cohesion (Lebanon, Iraq). While it may seem a contradiction to highlight the presence of structural obstacles to Islamist success in two of the countries characterized above as likely to experience gradual Islamist ascendancy (Iraq and Lebanon), the point here is that Islamists can still experience surges in political influence even where they are not able to capture the state. Indeed, the advantages these particular Islamists enjoy are more a function of either their outsider, nonestablishment status (Sadrist in Iraq) or of their ability to adroitly navigate sectarian politics in the face of a severely impaired central state (Hizbullah in Lebanon) rather than their ideological appeal.

This does not mean that it is impossible or unnecessary to track shifts in the political fortunes of Islamists operating in constrained political environments. Indeed, the strategies Islamists employ under such conditions provides evidence of how they think about politics and their capacity to adapt.<sup>11</sup> Rather, the point here is to recognize that in many settings today, as in the recent past, Islamists confront either an enforced political ceiling (especially in the monarchies) or a national political environment defined by conflict, instability, and even fundamental questions of sovereign integrity. It is therefore likely that for the foreseeable future we can expect to see a continuing trend of Islamist self-limiting in various forms.

In monarchies, Islamists will continue to accept the dominance of the palace and its agenda as the price of participation. Across multiple settings in which Islamist political ambition is constrained, we may see these groups pursuing parts of their agenda within the confines of civil society by means of broader Islamic social movements that serve as the bedrock foundation

of Islamist political parties. This retrenchment may also lead to increased partnership and collaboration (along ongoing competition) with other Islamic actors working within civil society, including Salafis. Based on the experience of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood from 2012 to 2013, many Islamists may conclude that too much political ambition is dangerous and that seeking power or undue exposure is to be avoided.

Even in Tunisia, the country where Islamists appear to have the best short-term prospects, Ennahda is likely to proceed with extreme caution in order to avoid a return to the intense polarization that characterized Tunisian politics in 2012–2013 and ultimately led to its downfall. Islamists there have a strong track record of working in partnership with factions representing other ideologies and dealing with controversial issues in a deliberative, inclusive fashion. Perhaps the greatest risk Ennahda faces is a growing perception on the part of some of its supporters that the party is so concerned with appeasing secularists and remnants of the prerevolutionary regime (both of which remain powerful in Tunisian politics) that it will end up facilitating a return to the very status quo it opposed for so long.

Islamist movements have also faced internal factionalization and existential crisis. In several countries where Islamists have experienced recent waves of oppression or heavy-handed regulation at the hands of the state—notably Egypt and Jordan—Islamist movements have fragmented. In most cases, the basic terms of the internal debate concern differences of opinion over the appropriate response to regime pressure. In Jordan, for example, the chief divide within the Muslim Brotherhood and Islamic Action Front tendency is between one group willing to align itself with the crown in exchange for more political space (à la the Justice and Development Party in Morocco) and another—currently proscribed—that prefers to maintain a more clearly oppositionist orientation. The divide speaks to two very different assessments of Jordan's political future. On the one hand, there are palace accommodationists who see broad stability over time and hope gradually to convince the regime to adopt select planks of their platform in return for placating their constituency. On the other hand, there are oppositionists who are betting on a more fundamental crisis of palace legitimacy in the near to medium term that would permit them to negotiate a higher price for lending support.

Perhaps nowhere in the Middle East today is this internal Islamist factionalization as pronounced and intense as in the case of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. Because the Brotherhood operates almost entirely underground, its internal dynamics are particularly opaque

at present. Nevertheless, by tracking the pronouncements of various figures and entities claiming to speak for the group as a whole, it is possible to get a general sense of the major divisions within the movement. One faction, consisting of those who might be called neo-Harakis (a reference to their emphasis on the *haraka*, or “movement”), reject politics, believing that the Brotherhood’s foray into the political arena and ascendancy to the presidency was a severe mistake, never to be repeated. They prefer an almost total retrenchment within the Muslim Brotherhood social movement at the level of community and civil society, as well as the renunciation of political involvement. Another group might be called neo-Qutbists (in reference to Sayyid Qutb, the radical Brotherhood ideologue of the 1950s and 1960s). They believe that the experience of the Freedom and Justice Party and Morsi proved that the Egyptian deep state will never accept Islamists in power and that the only way forward involves direct confrontation with the state and, eventually, a new revolution. Some affiliated with this faction have been involved in revenge attacks on the personnel and facilities of the security service protecting the regime. Another revolutionary faction, which consists of those who might be called neo-Thawrists (to indicate their ongoing faith in the possibility of a new *thawra*, or “revolution”), remains open to the possibility of future political participation, perhaps in concert with non-Islamist groups, but only after a new revolution that results in a purge of the deep-state institutions, especially the internal security forces and judiciary. These three groups represent broad, ideal-type orientations. It is difficult to say with certainty how accurately they map on to the sociopolitical reality of Egypt at present. Indeed, as one young former Brotherhood activist put it, the main orientation of most young Egyptians, Islamist or otherwise, is a complete disillusionment with politics and a preoccupation with survival.<sup>12</sup>

The problem of internal factionalization points to a broader crisis of identity and vision that many Islamists deal with today. As the post-Islamism thesis predicts, Islamists seeking to advance their goals through the ballot box and mainstream politics today have had to embrace the political center so thoroughly that they have become ideologically indistinct from most other political groups.<sup>13</sup> In sum, Islamists in the Arab world seem to be at an ideological crossroads. Interest in the ramifications of the classic slogan “Islam is the solution” and advocacy for an Islamic political order based on direct implementation of sharia have worn thin, even among most party faithful. Other than “Muslim democracy” and the nebulous *wasatiyya*, no identifiable or coherent ideological vision has emerged to replace the standard Islamist formulas. Against this

backdrop of intellectual stagnation, Islamists have to contend with a significant number of Arabs who believe that Islamists still harbor an extremist or ultraconservative religious agenda, along with others who, having experienced Freedom and Justice Party rule, believe that Islamists just do not know how to govern.

There are those, such as Erdoğan and Ghannoushi, who have sought to parlay this condition into a strategic opportunity by charting what they see as a new course for “Muslim democracy,” more or less openly declaring the demise of Islamism. They may yet succeed. But even if Islamist politics can be preserved in one form or another, the range of contexts in which its empowerment would be possible, permissible, or relevant seems very limited, unless and until the broader political landscape of the Middle East become more stable, with at least a modicum of political opening.

Finally, the shifting sociology of Islamist affiliation. Issues of factionalization and ideological vision express a top-down orientation to the analysis of political Islam; that is, they presume that organizational dynamics and the agency of movement or party leaders are the key determinants of how Islamism will evolve going forward. But one clear trend, observable since at least the mid-1990s, suggests that bottom-up pressures have played a significant role in shaping the course of Islamism in the Arab world. Thus, we also need to ask questions about who is joining Islamist groups today and why.

Leading scholars of political Islam such as Carrie Wickham and Khalil Al-Anani have emphasized generational differences within Islamist membership as a key force shaping the orientation and internal politics of these movements.<sup>14</sup> As new members joined Islamist groups during different phases in the political history and development of Arab nations, they brought with them different understandings and expectations about what political Islam means and what it could or should deliver. Even the intense ideological indoctrination associated with joining a group such as the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood has had to contend with the fact that, ultimately, these groups mirror the broader society around them and have to address the issues of the day.

We can discern important clues about possible shifts in the political sociology of Islamist recruitment and affiliation from the work of scholars such as Avi Spiegel. In his book *Young Islam*, Spiegel provides a fascinating portrait of grassroots Islamist mobilization in Morocco.<sup>15</sup> Through conversations with young members and potential recruits to both the Adl w’al-Ihsan

movement and the Justice and Development Party, Spiegel discovered that people have a wide range of motivations for joining Islamist groups and varying—even contradictory—understandings of what Islamism means. For many, Islamism does not represent a specific ideology or a clear and distinctive package of political solutions. Rather, they see Islamism in an aspirational sense, as the hope or possibility of an alternative politics—even if its specific agenda and content remain fluid and undefined. For them, Islam functions as a symbol of something more virtuous and authentically “theirs,” even if its ideological prescriptions remain undefined. Islam provides a culturally and politically permissible means of registering dissent. This is consistent with views offered by current Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood youth activists. They report a sense on the part of many of their movement colleagues that, in the broad climate of entrenched or renewed authoritarianism in the Arab world, ideological labels such as “secularism,” “Islamism,” “leftism,” and “liberalism” are essentially meaningless. The only relevant political distinction, as they see it, is whether one supports or opposes the regime—and embracing Islamism, even absent any clear ideological conviction or political agenda, becomes one means of registering opposition.<sup>16</sup>

Egypt is, of course, an extreme case at present, and the trend Spiegel describes in Morocco cannot be extrapolated to political Islam across the region as a whole. Similarly, to claim that Islamism is ideologically vacuous today would be inaccurate and unfair. However, it is certainly the case that its proponents have to contend with a shifting marketplace of political expectations, and constituencies look for a “value proposition” that accords with their own social and economic priorities. By and large, this has meant that Islamists have had to back away from a strong focus on religious agendas or the promotion of sharia in favor of a political agenda that broadly endorses liberal economic prescriptions and the champions public morality—in short, a relatively conventional agenda of social conservatism. If, however, voting publics start to view the Islamist focus on issues of public morality (e.g., pornography, blasphemy) as a smoke screen masking their inability to address economic woes and bad governance, they will have to struggle to maintain support. Likewise, those gravitating toward Islamism as a generic signifier of an alternative to the status quo will likely lose interest or turn elsewhere if political Islam turns out to be an impotent shell.

## Islamism at a Crossroads?

Looking at political Islam in the aggregate, the various trends outlined in this chapter suggest a relatively bleak future for Islamism. In almost all settings where Islamists continue to participate in formal politics, they are subject to political constraints by incumbent regimes or compelled to engage in self-limiting behavior. At the level of ideas, it seems increasingly unclear what Islamists stand for in concrete terms and whether they are able to offer a distinctive vision that can differentiate them from their political rivals. By the same token, it is not even clear that their members, who join for a variety of reasons, understand Islamism to have a coherent political agenda. Finally, Islamists will likely find it increasingly difficult to compete in a diverse and crowded field of actors offering many differing pathways and modalities for pursuing an Islamic way of life.

Given the trend toward post-Islamism and the likelihood of ongoing palace hegemony in Morocco in Jordan, there are essentially three settings in which it is possible that Islam might reemerge as an important political force in the medium to longer term (five or more years). The first of these is the civil war context of Libya, Syria, and Yemen, and the long-standing conflict in Israel/Palestine. In all of these countries, *ikhwanist* groups played a significant role in politics before and in some cases during the conflicts. The Libyan Muslim Brotherhood proved surprisingly resilient in the immediate post-Qaddafi period, and its organizational base will provide it with a comparative advantage following any political settlement in that country's current impasse. In Syria, Islamists of various sorts are prominent within the rebel forces and are likely to emerge as one of the more credible political actors at the popular level if and when stability and a new governing synthesis emerge in Syria.<sup>17</sup> Al-Islah in Yemen has declined in popularity in the context of the conflict there but may yet have a role in helping to hold together any postconflict governing coalition. Any reengagement of the Middle East peace process will require some minimal and sustained reconciliation or power-sharing agreement between Hamas and Fatah. This, in turn, will require that whichever Arab state serves as the process guarantor—most likely Saudi Arabia—find some *modus vivendi* with Hamas.

Second, despite the draconian crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, the regime has not succeeded in eliminating it outright as an influential force in society. One opinion poll following the 2013 coup suggested that 38 percent of Egyptians still have a favorable view of the Islamists.<sup>18</sup> This is a precipitous decline from the 75 percent support they enjoyed in 2011, but still remarkable given Morsi's deep unpopularity, the intensity of the regime's crackdown,

and the risk of expressing support for a banned organization. Despite the intense factionalization, it appears that the Brotherhood continues to operate in Egypt, albeit quietly, as a social movement at the community and neighborhood levels. While its Egyptian-based leadership who managed to avoid detention have maintained an underground presence, it is questionable how much control they have over the day-to-day operations of the movement. Likewise, exiled Brotherhood leaders have not refrained from bold declarations and rhetoric, but it is not clear whether the rank and file in Egypt are paying attention. The most likely scenario for Islamists' reemergence in Egypt involves an accommodationist faction of the movement striking a bargain with the regime, similar to the deal they made with Sadat in the 1970s. It is not impossible to imagine an increasingly beleaguered Sisi (or even his successor), unable to make progress in addressing the nation's economic challenges, reaching out to rehabilitate the Brotherhood in order to shore up support. Such an arrangement would likely look similar to Egypt in the 1980s and 1990s—a Muslim Brotherhood banned from politics but increasingly prominent in civil society—and could provide the Islamists with a new foundation on which to build.

Finally, it will be important to keep an eye on Tunisia as the one context that might provide a sustainable model for the normalization and integration of Islamists into electoral politics and successful power sharing. Ennahda has won one election, overseen a vexed but ultimately successful and widely supported constitutional process, experienced deep political polarization and negotiated to voluntarily relinquish power, lost the subsequent election but joined and supported the resulting coalition government, and enjoyed success in local and municipal elections—positioning its members well for the next general election. This is an impressive record of accomplishment and one that suggests a rapidly growing political maturity that may allow Ennahda to provide a road map for Islamists elsewhere looking for a new strategic and operational paradigm.

The combination of regional upheaval and the associated volatility in the political fortunes of Islamist parties make it a particularly difficult time to predict the future of political Islam with any certainty—even when some of the broad trend lines are clear. This effect is compounded by the fact that the political vision and identity of Islamism had been subject to considerable debate and diffusion for some time before the Arab Uprisings. While Islamism may well be at a crossroads today with little prospect of near-term dominance in the region, it is also clear that political Islam will continue to exert significant social and political influence in the

New Middle East—even if (or perhaps because) the nature and meaning of political Islam continue to be subjects of vociferous debate among its supporters and detractors alike.



---

## Chapter 6

1 For the classic account of political opportunity structures, see Charles Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1978).

2 Monica Marks, “Why do Tunisia’s Islamists Support an Unpopular Law Forgiving Corruption?” *Washington Post*, May 5, 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/05/05/why-do-tunisia-islamists-support-an-unpopular-law-forgiving-corruption/?utm\\_term=.05f6b7860b4f](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/05/05/why-do-tunisia-islamists-support-an-unpopular-law-forgiving-corruption/?utm_term=.05f6b7860b4f).

3 Stacey Philbrick Yadav, “How War Is Changing Yemen’s Largest Islamist Coalition,” *Washington Post*, March 27, 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/03/22/how-war-is-changing-yemens-largest-islamist-coalition/?utm\\_term=.5de6a653b8dd](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/03/22/how-war-is-changing-yemens-largest-islamist-coalition/?utm_term=.5de6a653b8dd).

4 The term “ikhwanist” denotes political movements organizationally independent from, but broadly inspired by, the ideological roots of the Ikhwan al-Muslimin, or Muslim Brotherhood.

5 Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, “Beliefs about Sharia,” in *The World’s Muslims: Religion, Politics, and Society* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, April 30, 2013), chap. 1, <http://www.pewforum.org/2013/04/30/the-worlds-muslims-religion-politics-society-beliefs-about-sharia/>.

6 See the Arab Barometer Wave IV (2016–2017), <http://www.arabbarometer.org>.

7 For a broad overview of the *wasatiyya* movement, see Raymond William Baker, *Islam without Fear: Egypt and the New Islamists* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

8 Vali Nasr, “The Rise of Muslim Democracy,” *Journal of Democracy* 16, no. 2 (April 2005): 13–27.

---

9 See Rachid Ghannouchi, “Participation in Non-Islamic Government,” in *Liberal Islam: A Sourcebook*, ed. Charles Kurzman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 89–95.

10 Arguably even Algeria is still dealing with the legacy of the 1990s conflict in ways that structure and constrain political outcomes, including the political fortunes of Islamist parties.

11 Shadi Hamid, *Temptations of Power: Islamists and Illiberal Democracy in a New Middle East* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); Nathan Brown, *When Victory Is Not an Option: Islamist Movements in Arab Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012).

12 See Shadi Hamid and William McCants, “Islamists on Islamism today: An Interview with Mustafa Elnemr, Muslim Brotherhood Youth Activist,” *Markaz* (blog of the Brookings Institution), April 4, 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2017/04/04/islamists-on-islamism-today-an-interview-with-mustafa-elnemr-muslim-brotherhood-youth-activist/>.

13 On post-Islamism, see Olivier Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994); Roy, *Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

14 Carrie Wickham, *The Muslim Brotherhood: Evolution of an Islamist Movement* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013); Khalil Al-Anani, *Inside the Muslim Brotherhood: Religion, Identity, and Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

15 Avi Spiegel, *Young Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

16 Peter Mandaville, *Political Pluralism in the Middle East and North Africa* (Washington, DC: Hollings Center for International Dialogue, March 2018), <https://hollingscenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/PPMENA-Report-Final.pdf>.

17 Shadi Hamid, “Syria’s Most Important Rebels Are Islamists, and We Have to Work with Them Anyway,” Brookings Institution, October 8, 2013,

---

<https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/syrias-most-important-rebels-are-islamists-and-we-have-to-work-with-them-anyway/>.

18 “Muslim Brotherhood Popularity Declines,” Pew Research Center Global Attitudes and Trends, May 21, 2014, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2014/05/22/one-year-after-morsis-ouster-divides-persist-on-el-sisi-muslim-brotherhood/egypt-report-13/>.