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TAKING STOCK OF THE MIDDLE EAST IN 2015

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The Recurring Rise and Fall of Political Islam

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For political Islamic groups, the past four years have been the best of years and the worst of years. In this period, the Arab world's oldest and largest political Islamic movement, the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), had its biggest ever victory in its homeland of Egypt, followed a year later by its biggest defeat. In the same period, a jihadi-salafi group, the Islamic State group (ISG), conquered large swaths of these two countries and announced the establishment of the Islamic State and the restoration of the caliphate in the person of its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.¹ This hyper-radical jihadi proto-state attracted an international fringe of radical fighters.

But it caused a revulsion among majorities throughout the Arab world and triggered the establishment of an international and regional military coalition against it. Other non-jihadi salafi groups formed political parties and joined the political process after the Arab uprisings and are trying to navigate the troubled waters between the MB and the jihadi radicals.

Some states have accommodated MB and salafi-affiliated Islamist political parties while others have moved to banish them. New regional and international alliances have sprung up for and against the MB. All states in the region have moved to fight the radical jihadists, while the extremists

1. The Islamic State group (ISG) is also known by several names, including ISIS (the Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham), ISIL (the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant), and IS.

have succeeded in occupying spaces left open by failing states.

Majorities that voted Islamist parties to power in Egypt and Tunisia turned into majorities that protested their monopolization of power and attempts to Islamize the state and society. In 2012, it appeared as if MB-led political Islam would define the future of the Middle East. By the end of 2013, the MB had suffered a strong blow in Egypt and had to step down from power in Tunisia. By 2014, it was radical

jihadism that had once more reclaimed center stage. Political Islam thus has been an integral part of the turbulent dynamics of the past four years and is likely to be a complex and dynamic factor in the region's politics for many years to come.

Interestingly, Islamic movements were not an early part of the sudden and massive uprisings of the winter of 2011. In most countries, MB and salafi groups had been in uneasy accommodations with authoritarian regimes. State elites monopolized political and economic power and closed down political space while allowing Islamist groups to occupy social and cultural space. The uprisings were originally spearheaded by youth who were not part of the old bargains. Joining them was a population fed up with the long-standing

status quo and eager for change. Islamist parties joined in once they saw the train leaving the station. The uprisings did not have an Islamist message, but rather clamored inarticulately for some form of social democracy: an end to dictatorship and repression, the establishment of elected and accountable government, and the provision of freedom, dignity, bread, jobs, and social justice.

While these slogans dominated the uprisings, it was the Islamist parties that won the post-uprising elections. It is not because they commanded natural majorities, but be-

cause they had the grassroots networks and party organizations that could run and win election campaigns. Meanwhile, the youth, liberals, nationalists, leftists, and other groups remained divided. They were good at organizing protests and appearing on talk shows, but not at grassroots party organizing. Indeed, had the non-Islamist anti-regime factions backed one candidate in the Egyptian presidential elections of 2012, their candidate would have won the presidency, and Egypt would have embarked on a different path in its troubled transition.

The Islamist parties had their own weakness: while they could win elections, they were unprepared to govern. This should not be surprising, as few of them imagined in 2010 that they would be anywhere near

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power in 2012. Their biggest failing was perhaps political, not technocratic. They mistook their narrow electoral victories as a broad endorsement of their Islamist agenda. In fact it was the reluctant nod of a public eager for change and looking for a party to lead an inclusive transition. Indeed, the Islamists' one year of power in Egypt and Tunisia was a botched opportunity in more ways than one. They not only alienated electoral allies and antagonized powerful state institutions, but they also upset broad cross sections of the population. Many citizens had come to view them sympathetically as long-persecuted opposition groups and hoped that they would bring more abilities and probity to government. They were disappointed to find that once in government, the Islamists exhibited many of the same failings and ineptitudes of past politicians.

Not surprisingly, secularists bristled at the Islamists' attempts to push Islamic law. Many observant Muslims also bristled at the idea that their government and politicians were now going to tell them how to pray and practice their own religion. In the case of Egypt, in particular, rarely has a party lost so much by winning so handily.

The MB in Egypt is at a low point in its long history. It is not the first time it has been persecuted by the state. But the campaign is deeper than previous ones, and it was accompanied—especially early on—by a broad public outcry against the group. The accommodation with the state that it enjoyed under Anwar al-Sadat and Hosni Mubarak is gone. And the bridges and sympathies that the MB had built with other groups and sectors of society are also in tatters. The MB is and will remain a major group within society. But while it had maneuvered to the center of the revolution and rose to power, it is now on the edges of both power and the social center, fighting to get back in. And perhaps that word, fighting, is the key to guessing at its future.

In interpreting this demise, the MB has chosen to focus on the military coup of July 3 rather than the public uprising of June 30. It focuses on the illegalities of removing an elected president by force and the violent crackdowns that ensued. It largely ignores the tenuous illegitimacy of clinging to power after the majority of the public, in the midst of a historic revolution, was demanding an end to MB rule and the holding of fresh presidential elections.

Few Islamists have attempted such a self-critique. Their preoccupation with their removal by the military led many to conclude that the democratic path to power is rigged against them and that they have to fight force with force. For the time being, there seems no path toward reintegration. The MB is still maximalist in its position

of restoring the Mohammed Morsi presidency. But the government of President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi has declared the MB a terrorist organization and seeks no accommodation.

Meanwhile the main salafi party, Nour, is trying to occupy some of the Islamist political space the MB vacated. The Nour Party had fallen out with the MB during the latter's year in power and sided with the 2013 popular uprising and military intervention. The next parliamentary elections, originally set for March but then postponed, will determine Nour's political strength moving forward. Although the party promotes an Islamist political discourse that President Sisi generally rails against, the party has made clear that it is his political ally. Indeed, Nour might seek to recreate the old relationship between the Mubarak regime and the MB, in which the latter enjoyed a wide presence socially—and occasionally politically—as long as it did not directly challenge the ruling authority.

Although the MB's saga in Egypt is indeed central, given the size and history of the movement there, the movement has affiliates throughout the Arab world. Indeed, around 2012 it appeared that an MB network was poised to dominate the next decade or more of Arab political life. It had notched victories in the bellwether Arab spring countries of Tunisia and Egypt, had a strong presence in Yemen, Libya, Morocco, and Syria, and won strong backing from Turkey and Qatar. But the debacle

in Egypt, the stalemate in Tunisia, and other developments, including a strong backlash from powerful Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, blocked that dominance.

For his part, President Sisi has been well aware of the political pull of religion. The Grand Imam of al-Azhar and the Coptic Pope stood alongside him when he announced the removal of Morsi. And in a New Year's speech before Azhar, he called on the institution to lead a revolution in Islamic thinking. He charged that contemporary Islamic trends were "antagonizing the entire world." He called on Azhar and other established institutions to lead a reform of religious teaching and communication to "suit the modern age." But it is doubtful whether old religious institutions such as Azhar can successfully reinvigorate themselves to compete with more dynamic political movements that have strong grassroots networks and social media skills.

In Tunisia, polarization between the Islamist ruling Ennahda party and wide cross sections of the political and civil society opposition had reached extremes in 2013. The assassination of two prominent anti-government leaders was pushing the country toward possible civil conflict, and attempts to reach a compromise solution were getting nowhere. But Ennahda was sticking to its positions, leaning on its electoral mandate and confident that with rising MB power in Egypt and elsewhere, they were on the winning side of history.

The events in Egypt in the summer of 2013 reshuffled the political deck in Tunisia. The opposition redoubled its efforts to bring down the government, but here Ennahda chose accommodation over confrontation. The party agreed to step down from power, accept a neutral interim government, and engage in fresh talks to draft a constitution. Realizing that the Islamist agenda was the party's and not a point of national consensus, Ennahda dropped its insistence on Islamist clauses in the new constitution. The draft that was unanimously approved is remarkably secular, civic, and democratic.

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Ennahda had the luxury of learning from the Egyptian MB's missteps, the good fortune of not facing a formidable military establishment, and a wise leadership that could differentiate between party platforms and the exigencies of

pluralistic national constitution-building and politics. Ennahda in Tunisia has managed to ride out the turbulence and will be a key player in Tunisia's political life, among other players, for the foreseeable future.

Morocco exhibits a different example of an Islamist party in politics. The king sought to get ahead of the wave of demands unleashed in 2011. He pushed through the passage of a new constitution and invited the MB-affiliated party there, the Party of Justice and Development (PJD), to form the government after it did well in parliamentary elections. That accommodation between the monarchy and the PJD-led government has endured.

Of course the Moroccan case is special in a number of ways. First, it is a monarchy, not a republic, and hence the king can afford to open up electoral space without putting his ultimate rule in electoral question. Second, he has strong Islamist legitimacy and authority himself as heir to the Alaouite dynasty, which claims descent from the prophet and grants the king the title of "commander of the faithful." Third, the king retains extensive powers in the state and over key ministries in the government. Fourth, the PJD openly models itself on the Turkish Justice and Development Party (AKP) and seeks to be a mainstream political party with a conservative base, rather than a strictly Islamist party pushing an Islamist agenda. Nevertheless, the Moroccan case demonstrates that systemic conditions can affect political Islamic parties and that under the right conditions and with the right leadership, Islamist parties and leaders with MB roots can be encouraged to move toward the political center.

The MB-affiliated party in Yemen, Islah, also remains a significant political player. It has its own peculiar social and political history. It was founded in 1990 with support from the Ali Abdullah Saleh government as a counterbalance to the Socialist Party. It was based on a strong tribal backbone but also held together MB-leaning groups in the urban centers and more salafi sheikhs from the regions. The tribal “Sheikh of Sheikhs,” Abdullah al-Ahmar, led the party until his death in 2007. After that, it drifted into the opposition and became part of the uprising of 2011.

Islah was a key player in the transition and national dialogue process but has lost ground over the past year. It was on bad terms with former President Saleh and developed bad relations with President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi. It lost favor with Saudi Arabia for opposing the sacking of Morsi in Egypt. And it has lost key ground to the Zaydi Shi'ite Houthi movement, which took over the capital in the summer of 2014. The party has also lost some ideological ground to jihadi-salafi groups, most notably al Qaeda, which presents itself as a powerful counterforce to the Houthi movement, and to non-jihadi salafi parties such as the Peace and Development Party. The Islah Party remains an active player in the politics of post-uprising Yemen. But more vibrant political Islamic movements—the Houthi rebellion in the north and al Qaeda—threaten to tear the country apart along sectarian lines.

In Jordan and Kuwait, the MB-affiliated groups—the Islamic Action Front in Jor-

dan and the Islamic Constitutional Movement (or Hadas) in Kuwait—have seen their influence rise and fall largely echoing the rise and fall of the MB in Egypt. In Jordan and Kuwait, these groups were at the heart of wider protests for reform and political change that accompanied the early Arab Spring moments. They celebrated the electoral victory of the MB in Egypt and Tunisia but then suffered a popular and state backlash.

In Jordan, the wider population drew back from protest amid growing dismay about the missteps of MB rule in Egypt and grave concern about the disintegration of neighboring Syria in the wake of protests. In Kuwait, a similar pattern was also accompanied by a strong campaign by Saudi Arabia and the UAE to crack down on the MB in their own countries and to put pressure on Kuwait to do the same. Today both groups play a limited role, and tribal and pro-government groups have taken the majority of seats in parliament. Kuwait has long had a small but loud salafi political current that has engaged in electoral politics; the current secured four seats in the 2012 elections, out of 50, and two in 2014.

MB groups in Syria and Libya hoped to ride the anti-regime revolutions to political victory. But in both cases—as protests led to a shooting war, state collapse, and conditions of militia-dominated chaos—MB-affiliated groups have taken a back seat to more radical jihadi-salafi groups who are more adept at the use of extreme violence. In both Syria and Libya, the

space for politics has been extinguished. In conditions of civil war, the more radical groups have proven more effectual.

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Two regional backers, Qatar and Turkey, aided the upward momentum of the MB. Qatar's Al Jazeera had become the face and voice of the first wave of pro-democracy uprisings and had continued

to be an avid communicator for the MB governments that won the first round of elections. Qatar backed this up with generous financial aid to the governments of Egypt and Tunisia and arms to the Islamist rebels in Libya and Syria. But Qatar was powerless to stop the uprising and coup against the MB in Egypt and the pressured resignation of the Ennahda government in Tunisia. And Qatar came under intense pressure from Saudi Arabia and its GCC partners to end or at least dramatically curtail its support for the MB. Although on a course different from its GCC neighbors, Doha has been forced to accept the new realities, curtail its support for the MB, and even ask a number of the MB's leaders to leave Doha.

As the Arab Spring unfolded, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan seemed convinced that he, too, was on the right side of history and that the AKP model would be emulated throughout the Arab world. He welcomed MB victories in Egypt and Tunisia and reveled in a "victory tour" of Arab Spring countries in the fall of 2011. But his long shadow quickly shortened after the MB lost favor and power in Egypt, Ennahda had to step back in Tunisia, and his expectations of a quick rebel victory in Syria turned into a drawn-out civil war in which Bashar al-Assad and al Qaeda-affiliated terrorist groups ruled the day.

A Saudi/UAE/Sisi-led-Egypt alliance has emerged in place of the Turkey/Qatar/MB-led-Egypt trilateral alliance. Although Egypt and Saudi Arabia were on opposing sides of the MB issue in the 1960s, with Riyadh supporting the MB against Nasser's pan-Arab secular nationalism, they have now joined together to fight the group.

The MB continues to be part of political life in some Arab countries such as Morocco, Tunisia, and Yemen. But it is under strong repression in Egypt and the GCC and has lost ground to radical jihadists in Syria and Iraq. It will remain an important trend in Arab political life, but its political fortunes will vary dramatically from country to country based on the decisions of its local leaders and the conditions of each country.

For the non-jihadi salafi groups that have chosen to remain in the political realm, it remains to be seen whether they will be able to occupy some of the space ceded by the MB and whether they will be able to build bridges with other secular and nationalist sectors of society while maintaining a strict Islamist discourse.

On the jihadi-salafi side of the political Islamic spectrum, the ISG has risen to central prominence, overshadowing al Qaeda as a regional and global brand. Numerous groups pledged allegiance to the new caliphate including Ansar Beit al-Maqdis in Sinai, Ansar al-Shari'a in Yemen, Jund al-Khilafah in Algeria, in addition to fighters in Libya, Tunisia, and further afield in Nigeria, Pakistan, reaching all the way to the Abu Sayyaf group in the Philippines.

In ideological provenance, of course, there are historical links between the mainstream MB and the radical offshoots. The socio-religious movement founded by Hassan al-Banna in Egypt in the late 1920s was given a radical and militant reinterpretation by Sayyid Qutb while in an Egyptian jail in the 1960s. Ayman al-Zawahiri, a co-founder of al Qaeda, took it in a radical and violent direction. In other words, the Egyptian MB did give birth to more radical offshoots, but the main

movement remained within the political camp, not presenting violence as the primary means to change society.

One mistake of the MB in power in Egypt is that it did not put enough distance between itself and these radical groups, blurring the line between the two approaches. When challenged politically and then by the military, it used the language of martyrdom and armed retaliation—perhaps exactly what the military hoped it would do—rather than political compromise. In any case, the mainstream MB and its

radical offshoots are distinct movements and phenomena despite a complex history and set of relationships.

The major rise of jihadi-salafi groups has a different socio-strategic provenance. It was forged among a band of radical Islamic Arabs in the crucible of American and Gulf support to

the jihadi resistance to Soviet occupation in Afghanistan of the 1980s and then catapulted to international fame through the events of September 11, 2001. The movement married radical Islamist ideology with effective fighting experience and ample funding. It found refuge first in the Taliban state of the 1990s. It then sought to sink roots wherever state authority was collapsing and ungoverned space was available. Despite al Qaeda's dispersion and small defeats, it spread as

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an idea through the Internet to susceptible youth or groups around the world and morphed into a decentralized network that could claim a presence from Morocco to the mountains of Pakistan and beyond.

Radical jihadi groups have proved most effective at seizing territory in ungoverned spaces where state authority doesn't exercise control. Today radical jihadi groups dominate swaths of territory in parts of Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, Sinai, Libya, and Mali. The biggest resurgence and conquest have been in Syria and Iraq, where the ISG has carved out a state-sized piece of territory astride the Syrian-Iraqi border. The ISG considers all other parties and movements, including the MB, woefully lacking in the proper piety and zeal.

The ISG has now eclipsed al Qaeda as the dark hero of an angry and disgruntled Muslim fringe around the world. Al Qaeda's model of launching occasional terrorist operations against Arab or Western targets has been supplanted by a much more tenacious model of conquering and holding territory and claiming to re-establish an Islamic caliphate, all the while slaughtering civilians, enslaving women, and reveling in the sadism of online beheadings.

Where state institutions exist, these groups can be battled and kept at the margins, as they do not represent social mainstream thinking. But the groups have a strong hold in areas where state authority is non-existent and particularly where Sunni communities have strong political and security grievances, as in present day Iraq and Syria. This radical strain is unlikely to be stamped out completely in our lifetime. But where state authority can be restored through fresh political compacts, the ISG's writ can be gradually sapped of its political energy and combatted by re-constituted state institutions.

CONCLUSION

It is impossible in a short essay to do justice to the vast and complex topic of political Islam's current trajectories. In this essay, I have focused mainly on the MB and its affiliates and the ISG and similar jihadi groups. I have not given equal space to the varied trajectory of salafi movements—some of which are part of the jihadi movement, others part of the MB, but many more charting an independent course. Nor have I examined the powerful role of militant Shi'ite Islamic groups such as Hezbollah and numerous Iraqi Shi'ite militias that have been buttressed by Iran and that have helped heighten sectarian tensions and tear apart the fabric of the Levant.

But for the mainstream MB and for the radical jihadi fringe, the past four years have been dramatic ones. The MB has proven most effective at mobilizing for elections while the radical jihadi fringe has done best mobilizing for civil wars. This partly reflects the declining appeal of nationalist and non-religious ideologies, which were able to mobilize parties, revolutions, and civil wars in the Middle East only a few decades ago. It also reflects the failure of non-religious groups to build strong grass roots and organize and communicate effectively.

But MB parties after elections have found that as political Islamic movements, unless they become more political and less Islamic, they will not be able to hold the center and hold on to power. Muslim populations are looking for parties to govern effectively, democratically, and fairly—not to tell them how to practice their religion. Radical jihadi groups are trying to take advantage of failed states to build states of their own. While they will find that they can exist at the margins, they are not able to build the sustained local support and external acceptance that could make their state projects viable.

In the recent past, political Islam seemed to be the future. Over the past four years, political Islamic movements have ram-paged loudly through the political and armed conflicts of the Arab world. But they have failed to make the transition from their ideological base to the wider public, as the AKP did—at least for a

while—in Turkey. And they failed to present a convincing example that they are ready to lead an inclusive polity or resolve a civil war.

But someone has to lead. The many disappointments—and small successes—of the past four years should spur leaders of mainstream political Islamic movements to examine the reasons for their reversals and recognize that general publics want better government services, not more religious governance.

More importantly, recent events should spur secular, nationalist, and other non-Islamist groups to examine the causes of their own weakness and redouble their efforts to organize, mobilize, and lead a movement of political renewal in the troubled Arab world. Meanwhile, the states and populations of the region have to keep up their fight against the ISG and al Qaeda and its affiliates, which thrive like a virus on the fevered dysfunctions of the status quo. They threaten not only regional and international security, but the very fabric of society for the millions of citizens in the Arab world who have clamored bravely for a more civic, free, just, and prosperous life. ■

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