ISLAMIST ACTORS AFTER THE 2011 ARAB UPRISINGS

The Arab Spring engulfed most of the Arab countries in the Middle East and North Africa, starting in 2011. Erupting first in Tunisia and later spreading to other countries in the region, the uprisings have illustrated that the borders of the Arab Middle East are permeable. The public rallies that called for better living standards, crackdowns on corruption, and a narrowing of the socio-economic gap evolved into a call for political reform, and destabilized the incumbent regimes. In this article, the author argues that as a result, some Islamist actors emerged as the main beneficiaries of the Arab uprisings, and their electoral rise in some countries—particularly in Tunisia with the Ennahda Movement—have necessitated systematic approaches to understand the role of Islamist parties in the region.

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The Arab Spring engulfed most of the Arab countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) starting in 2011. After first erupting in Tunisia, the social uprisings spread to most of the Arab countries. Although the uprisings particularly resonated in the region’s republics including Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Syria, they have so far yet to engulf the monarchies – Morocco and Jordan as such. The public protests were primarily motivated by economic injustice such as unemployment and corruption, but evolved into calls for greater political participation and freedom. This shift in protesters’ demands culminated in constitutional changes in most of the countries in the region, including new constitutions in Egypt and Tunisia. In this vein, one of the main upshots of this era has been the rise of Islamist political parties – particularly in Egypt and Tunisia – in ever-changing forms within the existing political rules.

The Authoritarian Reflex and Islamist Activism in the Post-Arab Uprisings

Although the uprisings have shaken incumbent regimes and long-standing rules, the authoritarian structures of these regimes have proven resilient, particularly among the monarchies in the region. In contrast, the regimes of the Arab republics were engulfed by the uprisings, in spite of the preemptive political and legal measures that were taken to sustain their rules. These regimes consolidated their rules through “authoritarian upgrading,” and the post-populist authoritarian Arab republics “built their power and legitimacy on a distinctive formula that had become increasingly dysfunctional.” Scholar Rex Brynen also indicates that in some cases, this process “involved partial or periodic political openings — a controlled degree of political liberalization and limited political pluralism that was intended by regimes as a substitute for, rather than a step toward, fuller democratization.”

Nevertheless, Pandora’s box was opened with the outbreak of the Arab Spring, and a crisis of legitimacy swept through the entire region. Enacting constitutional reforms or the reconfiguration of political systems thus became endemic in the region. The toppling of the long-lasting regimes in Egypt and Tunisia led to the empowerment of Islamists — although they were late participants — which alarmed leftists, secularists, and secular parties. The electoral rise of Islamists and the short-lived victory of the Ikhwan in Egypt were associated with the failure of the old regimes, as well as the weakness of non-Islamist opposition to mobilize and act coherently. Although Islamists’ political agendas have varied in each country and although the Islamist movement in the region is not monolithic, their various attempts to enact political

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transition have been met with some paradoxical results. While Morocco and Jordan exemplify cases of “controlled political liberalization” or “monarchical pluralism,” Egypt has turned to a form of “reformist authoritarianism” since the overthrowing of Muslim Brotherhood Society, also known as the Ikhwan. Meanwhile, the case of Tunisia is a clear example of “democratic transition,” or the democratization of authoritarian rule.

**The Rise of Islamists After the Arab Uprisings**

One of the most important ramifications of the Arab uprisings, or the Arab Revolutions, has been the rise of Islamists and Islamist political parties. Some argue that although they were not the only actors participating in the public rallies—and in most cases were actually late to join—Islamists hijacked the Arab Spring. On the other hand, some argue that Islamist movements did not lead the 2011 uprisings in the Arab Middle East, nor were they dominated by an Islamist agenda. Nevertheless, in most cases Islamists were seen as the main beneficiaries of these protests, and five years after the start of the Arab Spring, their integral position among the emergent factions is evident. Asef Bayat wrote: “We may be witnessing the coming of a post-Islamist Middle East, in which the prevailing popular movements assume a post-national, post-ideological, civil, and democratic character.” In Egypt, this included the Egyptian Movement for Change (“Kefaya”), the April 6 Youth Movement, and the “We are all Khaled Said” Movement, as well as the trade unions. In Tunisia, it was the workers under the umbrella of the Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT), members of the middle class, liberals, and a wide range of protestors that gathered and organized the public rallies in 2011.

Although Islamists—particularly the Ikhwan with its history of quick and effective mobilization—had been late participants in the public rallies, the domino effect of the upheavals ultimately positioned them as a key and integral part of the uprisings. Although some argued that exclusion could lead to radicalization among Islamists,

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Moderate Islamists in the Middle East are mostly associated with the Ikhwan. Historically, the Ikhwan’s non-violent approach, along with its relative flexibility and adaptability to changing circumstances, constitute the main reasons the party and its supporters have been considered moderate Islamists. Tunisia’s Ennahda and Morocco’s PJD are often considered the two main examples of moderate Muslim Brotherhood movements and are known as “neo-Islamists:” “progressive, pragmatic and striving for Sharia’s goals rather than its literal implementation.”

Towards Regime Survival in the Post-Arab Spring Era? Republics versus Kingdoms

The period after the fall of the regimes in Tunisia and Egypt generated hope for transition or democratization throughout the Middle East. However, the return of the military to politics in Egypt, the ongoing civil war in Syria, the crises in Iraq and Yemen, and the resilience of the monarchies in Morocco, Jordan, and the Gulf have reinvigorated the debate on regime survival strategies, façade democracies, and the resilience of monarchies.

The resilience of Arab monarchies is intertwined with the “traditional legitimacy” of their power, which functions as a stabilizing force in the process of political and social transformation. In other words, “traditional hereditary rule seems to be able

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8 Tarck Chamkhi, pp. 458.

to maintain power with more respect ... and with less need for the exercise of violence against citizens.\textsuperscript{10} The economic development and political incorporation policies of each regime have heavily influenced developments post-uprisings. While Morocco and Jordan have each managed to co-opt the drastic growth in social mobilization, the cases of Tunisia and Egypt have shown the opposite results.

\textit{Lessons From Tunisia: Is Tunisia an “Exception” in the Arab Middle East?}

In the aftermath of the Arab uprisings, the Tunisian transition to democracy has been regarded as the exception in the MENA region, with the greatest chance of success at achieving democracy.\textsuperscript{11} According to \textit{The Guardian}, the Tunisian exception can be attributed to the following:

19th century reforms had introduced a constitutional order, and the notion of separation between the state and religion ... In many ways, Tunisia’s 2011 revolution carried the seeds of its own success: Islamist fundamentalists played no role, the army came down on the side of peaceful change, and there was a strong civil service and middle class to build on. The role of Tunisian women in keeping militant Islamism at bay has been essential. Being smaller and less strategically positioned than Egypt may also have protected it from disruption from external powers.\textsuperscript{12}

The UGTT – the country’s main trade union – took a leading role at public rallies in the aftermath of the self-immolation of Mohammed Bouazizi. With the downfall of President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali and his almost 25-year rule on 14 January 2011, the Tunisian endeavour towards democratization began with the inauguration of the National Constituent Assembly (NCA) in October 2011, and a new constitution was finalized within a year. The multiparty elections held on 23 October 2011 were won by the Ennahda Party (Tunisia’s key Islamist movement), which took a legislative majority of 90 out of 217 seats. The second winner of the elections was the Nida Tunis (“Tunis Calls”) Party, which can be characterized as a liberal/secular coalition comprising of the members of the old al-Dustur Party of Habib Bourguiba and former president Ben Ali’s Constitutional Democratic Rally (CDR), as well as secular leftists and progressive liberals with ties to the ousted regime.

\textsuperscript{12} \textit{The Guardian}, 2014.
"The constitutional redesign in Tunisia neutralized the political role and interference of the military and religion in the country’s political life, unlike in the case of Egypt."

The Tunisian experience has demonstrated that democratization integrates Islamists into the emerging political system. The Ennahda Party, the country’s key Islamist movement, “stands out among its Arab counterparts by virtue of its pragmatism, efforts to reach out to other political forces, and sophisticated intellectual outlook. Some secular parties have sought...to build bridges with the movement.” The Ennahda Party was founded in 1981, but was barred from participation in the 1989 elections by President Ben Ali. The Ennahda Party was recognized as a terrorist organization by the ruling regime, and many of its members and sympathizers were imprisoned. Rachid Ghanouchi, the co-founder of the Ennahda Party, has traditionally been considered a moderate Islamist, and the Tunisian Islamist movement under his leadership has been a completely different case from that of the Egyptian Ikhwan or Morsi’s Freedom and Justice Party. For instance, he once said that, “the type of state we want is one that doesn’t interfere in people’s private lives,” adding that, “the state should not have anything to do with imposing or telling people what to wear, what to eat and drink, what they believe in, what they should believe in.”

Thus, the Ennahda’s moderate character is central to understanding the compromise made during both the Constituent Assembly elections of 2011 and more recently, the presidential elections in 2014. In an interview, Ghanouchi also underscored his position on the highly debated issue of Islam and democracy, stating that he “goes back to the values of the Koran rather than a literal reading of it,” and values such as “justice, public consultation and human rights are encapsulated in modern democratic states.”

The role of the Ennahda today – primarily during the parliamentary and presidential elections, as well as with drafting the new charter – strengthens the argument that Tunisia is the only base with bottom-up constitution making in the region, rather than top-down. The new social contract, after a series of negotiations between Islamists and secular/liberal groups, aims to highlight “the country’s civil character and creates a more balanced political system.” Accordingly, Al-Anani notes that:

15 Makul Devichand.
Surprisingly, the draft constitution abandoned Islamic law (Shariah), which can serve as a precedent in the Sunni Arab world. However, the most significant development in Tunisia’s new charter is the protection of freedoms and human rights. It guarantees personal and public freedoms, such as freedom of conscience, which protects those of all beliefs; freedom of expression; freedom of assembly; and the right to strike – though it also criminalizes violent incitement and apostasy.\textsuperscript{17}

Although the new constitution endorses Islam as the religion of the state – as was the case before – it also stipulates that the country is a “civil state based on citizenship, people’s will and rule of law.”\textsuperscript{18} It has been argued that one of the most promising elements of the new constitution in Tunisia is its commitment towards gender equality. For instance, Article 20 in the new charter stipulates that, “all male and female citizens have the same rights and duties. They are equal before the law without discrimination.”\textsuperscript{19} This article was passed by a vote of 116 to 40, with 32 abstentions, after heated debates between the Ennahda and women’s rights activists.

In addition, the constitutional redesign in Tunisia neutralized the political role and interference of both the military and religion in the country’s political life, unlike in the case of Egypt.

\textit{Lessons From Egypt and Jordan}

As one of the region’s most traditional states, Egypt experienced huge public rallies with the outbreak of the Arab uprisings. The biggest march took place in the heart of the capital city Cairo, on Tahrir Square. More than one million people took part, with cross-cutting ideological and socio-economic backgrounds. The long and uneasy process of constitutional redesign began with the toppling of Hosnu Mubarak in 2011. The Constituent Assembly (CA), which was in charge of drafting the new charter, was then challenged by disagreements between Islamist (Ikhwan’s Freedom and Justice Party and the Salafis’ Nur Party), liberal, secular, and minority groups.

Hence, the constitutional drafting process in 2011 was not without disputes. Liberals and the Coptic minority opted to withdraw from the CA, and on November 22nd, President Morsi issued a decree “giving himself sweeping powers.”\textsuperscript{20} The new

\textsuperscript{17} Khalil al-Anani.

www.turkishpolicy.com
The constitution was launched after the referendum in December 2012 which passed with 63 percent, albeit with a low voter turnout of merely 33 percent.

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Following the overthrow of Mohammed Morsi on 3 July 2013, some predicted that the degree of presidential powers might be whittled down slightly in the constitutional amendments. Even in early 2013, courts had begun to interpret its authority a bit restrictively and, for all the charges of “Brotherhoodization” of the state, Morsi hardly seemed to be able to exert much control over the military and security services. His successor – unless he comes from those parts of the state – is likely to fare no better.21

Egypt’s new constitution also gives more rights to women and removes certain Islamist-leaning clauses inserted under Morsi, while maintaining the principles of Islamic Sharia as the main source of legislation.22 Although now removed, the 2012 Constitution included a controversial article requiring that al-Azhar was to be consulted in matters related to Islamic Sharia. The new document also removed a clause stipulating that the source of legislation is Sharia Law.23

According to Khalil al-Anani, the fact that Morsi’s government remained its power only briefly is due to three intertwined factors: the Brotherhood’s conservatism and lack of a revolutionary agenda; organizational stagnation and inertia; and its leaders’ incompetence and inexperience in governance.24 For Cavatorta and Merone, “the dislodging of the Muslim Brotherhood from power through a military coup should not suggest Islamism in Egypt is a spent force.”25 The reason behind this party politics or mobilization in the Arab world is not without religious connotations.

Under conditions of social turmoil, monarchical structures provide the safest path for regime survival. In the case of MENA countries after the Arab uprisings, the statecraft of the monarchies has also sought to neutralize discontent more swiftly than the

21 Andréj Zwitser.
23 Patrick Kingsley.
republics in the years since. For instance, in Jordan, King Abdullah II launched preemptive campaigns of constitutional reform that alleviated public frustration, while at the same time preserving their core executive powers. These reforms, which included holding national elections, largely defused the protests in Jordan.

The Islamist movement in Jordan – and the Muslim Brotherhood in particular – as compared to Egypt and Tunisia, has been a long-standing neutral ally of the monarchy, and until recently had never been considered a threat to the survival of the Hashemite Kingdom. However, the nature of the relationship is changing due to the normalization of relations with Israel in 1994, and the public protests in 2011, and the subsequent fall of the Ikhwan in Egypt. There is a new group within the Brotherhood today that differentiates itself from the conservative wing. In 2015, this split within the Brotherhood also announced it would join a party to be formed by the Zamzam Initiative under the leadership of Irhail al-Gharaibeh.

The lack of a mass party and the weakness of the political actors’ ideological grounds helps the Islamic Action Front (the Ikhwan’s political wing in Jordan – IAF) act as the key ideological and political actor in Jordanian party politics. However, the recent split within the Brotherhood – which is also described as “Jordanization of the Brotherhood” – and the regime’s changing perceptions of the movement after the Arab uprisings meant that the long-standing non-confrontational relations between them have been replaced with fragility. In this respect, what makes the case of Jordan different from that of Tunisia relates to the role of religion in nation and state-building. Islam has been an integral part of Jordanian foreign policy with regard to East Jerusalem and the East Bank, and has also been a major source of regime legitimacy.

In addition, the strong tribal affiliations, as well as a Palestinian-Jordanian cleavage as per the example of Jordan, have driven the regime to take “old” steps of regime survival, as seen in the recent debate over the future of the Ikhwan movement.

**Conclusion**

One of the key outcomes of the Arab uprisings has been the emergence of Islamist political parties. Moreover, the nature of the Arab uprisings has demonstrated that the Islamist movement in the region is not monolithic, and that Islamist groups and the Muslim Brotherhood in each Arab country should be analyzed separately; according to the structural differences in each Islamist faction and according to the trajectories of state and nation formation in each case.

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The discourses and practices of Islamists following the Arab uprisings have also differed. The Islamist parties in Tunisia, Jordan, and Morocco are able to act within the political system, and what the Arab uprisings have brought them is a call for more political reform. The cases of Tunisia and Jordan highlight the historical and structural variations in their trajectories of state formation, and the relations between the ruling elites and the Islamist movement of each country exemplify this disparity. The regime in Jordan has launched reforms to ensure its survival and legitimacy, although these have been characterized as defensive democratization or symbolic processes of democratization. The shifts that have occurred in Tunisia and Jordan have once again brought questions to the surface about whether such parties become more moderate and integrated into the system when they are included in the political arena. For example, the patterns of behaviour between two major groups of Islamists in the Middle East—moderates/modernists and Salafi Jihadis—can be differentiated in the following manner:

Most [Islamists] are centrist and modernist and accept the rules and procedures of the democratic game, in shaping the future political trajectory of their societies. In contrast, the Salafis and Islamic ultraconservatives in general, who believe that Islam controls all social spheres and regulates the whole of human life, are a sizeable minority.

In contrast to Egypt, as the main Islamist movement in Tunisia and Jordan, the Ikhwan prefers to act within the political arena, accepting the rules and values of the political systems—if not the incumbent rule. Within this context, it is imperative to recall Bayat’s use of the term “post-Islamists.” He argues that Ennahda cannot be categorized as an Islamist party due to Ghannushi’s rejection of the Islamic Khalifa in favour of parliamentary democracy. In addition, “its aim, as expressed by its leader, seems to be inculcating pious sensibilities among Muslims within a democratic polity.”

The 2015 Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to the Tunisian National Dialogue Quartet – comprising the coalition of Tunisian workers, employers, lawyers, and activists – which was formed in 2013 “when the democratization process was in danger of collapsing because of political assassinations and widespread social unrest.”\[31\] Tunisia’s transition to democratization, so far, makes the case that democracy and Islam are not in contradiction. But the transition is still fragile.