STRATEGIES FOR ENGAGING POLITICAL ISLAM

SHADI HAMID & AMANDA KADLEC

JANUARY 2010

FRIEDRICH EBERT STIFTUNG

PROJECT on Middle East Democracy

About the Authors

SHADI HAMID

Shadi Hamid is Deputy Director of the Brookings Doha Center and Fellow at the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution. Prior to joining Brookings, he was Director of Research at the Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED) and a Hewlett Fellow at Stanford University's Center on Democracy, Development, and the Rule of Law. He currently serves as vice-chair of POMED's board of directors. Hamid has conducted extensive research on the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Jordan, most recently as a resident fellow at the American Center for Oriental Research in Amman. Previously, he served as a program specialist on public diplomacy at the U.S. State Department and a Legislative Fellow at the Office of Senator Dianne Feinstein. His articles have appeared in *The Washington Post, The New Republic, Democracy: A Journal of Ideas*, and many other publications. He is the author of "Resolving America's Islamist Dilemma: Lessons from South and Southeast Asia," published by The Century Foundation and, most recently, "Islamists and Nonviolent Action," which appears in *Civilian Jihad: Nonviolent Struggle, Democratization, and Governance in the Middle East*, published by Palgrave in December 2009.

AMANDA KADLEC

Amanda Kadlec is a former Dialogue Fellow at the Project on Middle East Democracy. Her most recent work includes research positions at the National Democratic Institute (NDI) in Cairo, Egypt and the Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars in Washington, D.C. She received her Master's degree in U.S. Foreign Policy at George Washington University's Elliott School of International Affairs. Prior to her time abroad and in Washington, Kadlec worked as a field organizer and campaign manager on federal and local election campaigns throughout the Midwest. Before her shift into the policy field, she received a B.S. in Finance from Saint Louis University, and worked as an Investment Banker at the public financing firm Stern Brothers & Co. headquartered in St. Louis, Missouri.

THE PROJECT ON MIDDLE EAST DEMOCRACY is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to examining the impact of American policy on political reform and democratization in the Middle East. Through dialogue, policy analysis, and advocacy, we aim to promote understanding of how genuine, authentic democracies can develop in the Middle East and how the U.S. can best support that process.

THE FRIEDRICH-EBERT-STIFTUNG is a non-profit German political foundation committed to the advancement of public policy issues in the spirit of the basic values of social democracy through education, research, and international cooperation. The foundation, headquartered in Bonn and Berlin, was founded in 1925 and is named after Friedrich Ebert, Germany's first democratically elected president.

The conclusions in this paper are those of the authors, and do not necessarily represent those of the Project on Middle East Democracy or the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.

Produced with the support of:

FRIEDRICH EBERT STIFTUNG

PROJECT on Middle East Democracy

Table of Contents

I. Introduction

Political Islam is the single most active political force in the Middle East today. Its future is intimately tied to that of the region. If the United States and the European Union are committed to supporting political reform in the region, they will need to devise concrete, coherent strategies for engaging Islamist groups. Yet, the U.S. has generally been unwilling to open a dialogue with these movements. Similarly, EU engagement with Islamists has been the exception, not the rule. Where low-level contacts exist, they mainly serve information-gathering purposes, not strategic objectives. The U.S. and EU have a number of programs that address economic and political development in the region – among them the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), the Union for the Mediterranean, and the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) – yet they have little to say about how the challenge of Islamist political opposition fits within broader regional objectives. U.S. and EU democracy assistance and programming are directed almost entirely to either authoritarian governments themselves or secular civil society groups with minimal support in their own societies.

"The future of relations between Western nations and the Middle East may be largely determined by the degree to which the former engages nonviolent Islamist parties in a broad dialogue about shared interests and objectives."

The time is ripe for a reassessment of current policies. Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, supporting Middle East democracy has assumed a greater importance for Western policymakers who see a link between lack of democracy and political violence. Greater attention has been devoted to understanding the variations within political Islam. The new American administration is more open to broadening communication with the Muslim world. Meanwhile, the vast majority of mainstream Islamist organizations – including the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Jordan's Islamic Action Front (IAF), Morocco's Justice and Development Party (PJD), the Islamic Constitutional Movement of Kuwait, and the Yemeni Islah Party – have increasingly made support for political reform and democracy a central component in their political platforms. In addition, many have signaled strong interest in opening dialogue with U.S. and EU governments.

The future of relations between Western nations and the Middle East may be largely determined by the degree to which the former engage nonviolent Islamist parties in a broad dialogue over shared interests and objectives. There has been a recent proliferation of studies on engagement with Islamists, but few clearly address what it might entail in practice. As Zoé Nautré, visiting fellow at the German Council on Foreign Relations, puts it, "the EU is thinking about engagement but doesn't really know how."[1] In the hope of clarifying the discussion, we distinguish between three levels of "engagement," each with varying means and ends: low-level contacts, strategic dialogue, and partnership.

1 "Strategies for Engaging Political Islam: A Middle East, U.S. and EU 'Trialogue,'" Event, February 26, 2009, http://pomed.org/?page_id=7538&preview=true

Political barriers and misunderstandings on both sides present significant challenges for engagement between Western governments and Islamists. How will pro-Western authoritarian regimes react to such overtures? To what extent can the U.S. and the EU formulate a common policy approach to a thorny, long-standing problem? What obstacles prevent Islamists from engaging with Western governments and to what extent can they be overcome?

To offer insights into these questions, the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung and the Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED) partnered to bring together scholars and experts from the Middle East, the United States, and Europe. Moderated by Nathan Brown, Director of George Washington University's Institute for Middle East Studies, guests discussed the topic "Strategies for Engaging Political Islam: A Middle East, U.S. and EU 'Trialogue.'" Panelists included Ruheil Gharaibeh, Deputy Secretary-General of Jordan's Islamic Action Front (IAF); Mona Yacoubian, Special Adviser to the Muslim World Initiative at the United States Institute of Peace; Zoé Nautré, Visiting Fellow at the German Council on Foreign Relations; and Shadi Hamid, Research Director at POMED at the time of the panel and currently Deputy Director of the Brookings Doha Center. This paper draws on the observations and recommendations of the participants.

II. Political Islam in Practice

"By fighting corruption and providing critical services, Islamists are often seen as the only viable alternative to ineffective state leadership. "

With governments failing to provide an effective social safety net, Islamist groups have filled the vacuum, creating parallel institutions that provide jobs, education, and health care to constituents. As Ruheil Gharaibeh points out, the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan runs emergency shelters, schools, medical clinics and hospitals, and a variety of other institutions.[2] In addition, Islamist groups and parties tend to be among the best organized and the most internally democratic. "The Islamic Action Front," notes Nathan Brown, "may be the most democratic party in the region in terms of its internal operations."[3] By fighting corruption and providing critical services, Islamists are often seen as the only viable alternative to ineffective state leadership. As a result, it is sometimes difficult to gauge the sources of Islamist popularity. Are they popular because of the specifically "Islamist" components of their message and program – for instance their unabashed social conservatism – or their ability to deliver to constituents? Many Islamist groups have built a reputation for integrity by taking elected positions seriously, learning the ins-and-outs of parliamentary procedure, and dutifully attending parliamentary sessions (MPs from ruling parties are often absent). As Samer Shehata and Josh Stacher write:

2 "Strategies for Engaging Political Islam: A Middle East, U.S. and EU 'Trialogue,'" Event, February 26, 2009, http://pomed.org/?page_id=7538&preview=true

3 Nathan J. Brown, "Jordan and Its Islamic Movement," Carnegie Endowment Paper, no. 74, November 2006, p. 3

"In order to permit Brotherhood MPs to fill their multiple roles, especially those of legislating and keeping the government accountable, the group created an organ that is part research arm and part think tank. This 'parliamentary kitchen,' as the Brothers call it, is divided into specialized teams that gather information about issues the MPs deal with in [parliament]."[4]

"Focusing more closely on behavior rather than belief can help us to understand how, when, and why Islamists moderate, and why they prefer certain political strategies."

An important distinction should be drawn between violent and nonviolent Islamist organizations. Organizations like Hamas and Hezbollah exist for military reasons, unlike most mainstream, mass-based Islamist groups, which are not fighting over territory. That said, both Hamas and Hezbollah, in the process of contesting elections and participating in government, have increasingly adopted some of the characteristics of a traditional political party.

There is great variation across mainstream Islamist groups due to their divergent domestic political contexts. The governments of Yemen, Kuwait, and Bahrain, for example, allow opposition groups more room for participation but Islamists there are generally more conservative than in countries where repression is high, as in Egypt, Syria or Tunisia.[5] In these countries as well as Turkey, where several religiously based parties had been banned in succession, Islamists have adopted increasingly moderate practices and policies.

Islamist parties are no different than secular ones when it comes to responding to certain political pressures, threats, and incentives. As Mona Yacoubian emphasizes, the notion that Islamist parties are static because they are based on ideology is simply not true.[6] Rather than returning to the perennial question of "do Islamists really believe in pluralism and democracy?" the U.S. and EU should ask how varying political and institutional structures produce different kinds of political behavior. For example, do Islamists generally approach political competition differently in monarchies than in republics? How does the manipulation of electoral laws – a preferred tactic of Arab regimes – affect the willingness of Islamists to use elections as primary venue of contestation? What effects do party bans have on Islamist groups (as in Egypt, Turkey, Algeria, and Syria) and how does the legalization of Islamist parties (as in Morocco and Jordan) affect their ideological and political development? Focusing more closely on behavior rather than belief can help us to understand how, when, and why Islamists moderate, and why they prefer certain political strategies over others. On the other hand, attempting to figure out what Islamists believe is likely to be futile, since beliefs are not necessarily accurate predictors of behavior.

4 Samer Shehata and Joshua Stacher, "The Brotherhood Goes to Parliament," Middle East Report, Fall 2006, http://www.merip.org/mer/mer240/shehata_stacher.html

5 Shadi Hamid, "Resolving America's Islamist Dilemma: Lessons from South and Southeast Asia," The Century Foundation, October 2008, http://www.tcf.org/publications/internationalaffairs/Hamid.pdf

6 "Strategies for Engaging Political Islam: A Middle East, U.S. and EU 'Trialogue,'" Event, February 26, 2009

"If the West and Islamists are to engage in fruitful cooperation, they must move beyond talking about each other and begin talking to each other."

For their part, moderate Islamists in Western-backed autocracies are increasingly aware that it will be exceedingly difficult for them to reach positions of power without U.S. or EU acquiescence. They understand that external pressure can play an important role in complementing domestic reform efforts. President George W. Bush's strong pro-democracy rhetoric, and specific mention of Egypt in his 2005 State of the Union address, coupled with Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's cancellation of a March 2005 trip to Cairo in protest of liberal opposition leader Ayman Nour's detention, emboldened the secular and Islamist opposition alike. Islamist politicians readily admit that American pressure on Arab autocrats during the "Arab spring" of 2004-5 was critical in opening up political space for the opposition (even if it did not last). As Abdel Menem Abul Futouh, one of the Egyptian Brotherhood's leading reformists, remarked: "everyone knows it…we benefited, everyone benefited, and the Egyptian people benefited."[7]

The examples of the Islamic Salvation Front's electoral victory in 1991 in Algeria, the subsequent military intervention, and, more recently, the international community's response to Hamas' surprise win in 2006, demonstrate that Western nations are capable of blocking or at least undermining Islamist participation in government. Attuned to this reality, Islamist groups are devoting greater attention to reaching out to Western publics and policymakers. Since 2005, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood started an official English-language website (ikhwanweb.com), published articles in leading Western newspapers (including one op-ed in the Guardian revealingly titled "No Need to be Afraid of Us" [8]), and has sought to establish links with Western think-tanks and NGOs. The Moroccan PJD embarked on a tour of Spain and France in 2005 to meet with senior governmental officials and political party representatives. In February 2009, as part of the event from which this paper evolved, Ruheil Gharaibeh, Deputy Secretary-General of the IAF, spent a week in Washington, DC, where he met with leading academics, researchers, and other members of the policy community. "If the West and Islamists are to engage in fruitful cooperation," says Gharaibeh, "they must move beyond talking about each other and begin talking to each other."[9]

While many Islamists are aware of the link between external pressure and domestic reform, they are also wary of being seen as seeking American and European help to undermine existing regimes. [10] Yet where substantial interaction with Western democracy assistance groups and officials has occurred – as with the AK party in Turkey, the PJD, and Yemen's Islah – charges of "collaboration" have failed to

7 Interview by Hamid with Abdel Menem abul Futouh, Cairo, Egypt, August 2006.

8 Khairat al-Shater, "No Need to Be Afraid of Us," Guardian, November 23, 2005, http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2005/nov/23/comment.mainsection.

9 "Strategies for Engaging Political Islam: A Middle East, U.S. and EU 'Trialogue,'" Event, February 26, 2009

10 Ruheil Gharaibeh upon his return to Jordan in late February came under attack in a series of articles in the pro-government media, which accused him of seeking to turn the West against the Jordanian regime.

erode Islamist popularity.

Perhaps a bigger obstacle to engagement is the mistrust that Islamists evince toward America and Europe, a result of the sometimes striking gap between Western pro-democracy rhetoric and policies that support repressive regimes. For example, France (as well as most European countries) voiced support for Algerian democratization in the late 1980s, but after the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), a legal opposition party, swept the first round of parliamentary elections in 1991, France was the first nation to recognize the new military-led government.[11] Similarly, the United States routinely expresses "concern" about human rights abuses in a variety of countries, while continuing to provide billions of dollars in economic and military support to these same regimes. As a result, many in the Middle East question how the U.S. can be interested in Middle East democracy if its policies are actively preventing it.

III. The State of Political Reform in the Region

The renewed attention to democratization in the Middle East after the September 11 terrorist attacks had an undeniable effect on political discourse in the region. With increasing American and European attention to political development, regimes and opposition groups alike felt a need to adapt their political strategies. The post-9/11 period also coincided with a sharp increase in government repression, as Arab regimes clamped down on nonviolent opposition groups under the guise of the U.S.-led war on terror. As the resort to authoritarianism increased – through, for example, the passing of draconian anti-terrorism legislation, dissolution of parliaments, and postponement of elections – so too did the desire of Islamist parties to counter this emerging trend by making democracy a kind of call-to-arms.

"The renewed attention to democratization in the Middle East after the September 11 terrorist attacks had an undeniable effect on political discourse in the region. "

In its 2003 electoral program, for instance, the IAF, the political arm of the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood, formally declared its commitment to two fundamental democratic precepts – alternation of power (tadowul al-sulta) and popular sovereignty (al-shaab masdar al sultat).[12] In 2004, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood released a major reform initiative, seen, in part, as a response to the Bush administration's own "Broader Middle East Initiative" earlier that year. In the following

11 Ivesa Lubben, "The Rise of Political Islam and the Implications for European Foreign Policy" in Bound To Cooperate: Europe and the Middle East II, ed. Christian-Peter Hanelt and Almut Moller (Gutersloh: Verlag-Bertlesman Stiftung, 2008), p. 350.

12 Na'am wa ila al-abad al-Islam hoa al-hal: Al-Barnamaj al-Intakhabi li-Murashi Hizb al-Jabha al-'Amal al-Islami, 2003-2007 (Yes and Forever, Islam is the Solution: The Election Program of the Islamic Action Front Candidates), IAF Parliamentary Office, October 2003, p. 7

"In most Middle Eastern countries secular ruling establishments are pitted against ascendant Islamists with few viable secular opposition parties as alternatives."

year the IAF in Jordan followed suit with its own "reform initiative," which – as Nathan Brown pointed out – was "so full of liberal and democratic ideas and language that a leader of a secular opposition party was forced to confess that it differed little from the programs of other parties."[13]

After six years without parliamentary representation, the IAF, which had boycotted the 1997 elections, won a plurality in the 2003 national polls, gaining 17 seats of 110, and re-establishing itself as the country's predominant opposition. Despite, or perhaps because of the party's return to parliamentary politics, regime-opposition relations subsequently deteriorated, culminating in the 2007 municipal and national elections, plagued by widespread allegations of government interference and voter fraud, and regarded as the least free and fair since the resumption of parliamentary life in 1989.

In Egypt, after a brief opening in early 2005, when President Hosni Mubarak announced multi-candidate presidential elections for the first time, there has been a similar regression. When the Muslim Brotherhood won 88 seats in the 2005 parliamentary elections, a five-fold increase from their previous total of 17, the Egyptian regime went on the offensive. In late 2006, authorities seized millions of dollars in assets and arrested some of the group's top financiers. Mass arrests of Brotherhood activists have become routine, with more than 800 being detained in the lead-up to 2008 municipal elections. In addition, the ruling National Democratic Party pushed through a constitutional amendment banning religiously oriented parties.[14] Increasing repression has provoked internal divisions in many Islamist groups, with some advocating a greater emphasis on education, preaching, and social service provision, while others support stronger opposition to regimes. Khaled Hamza, a prominent Brotherhood member in Egypt, calls these differing approaches madrasa al-dawa (the school of preaching and education) and madrasa al-siyasa (the school of politics), each reflecting prominent strands in Islamist thought.[15]

Democratic backsliding has taken place throughout the Middle East, including in Morocco, Yemen, Tunisia, and Algeria. With the exception of Turkey, there are few, if any, bright spots in the region. Even Turkey's democracy risked unraveling in 2008 due to a judicial effort to ban the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) for being a "center of antisecular activities." In most Middle Eastern countries secular ruling establishments are pitted against ascendant Islamists with few

13 Nathan J. Brown, "Jordan and Its Islamic Movement," p. 9

14 For more on regime measures against the Muslim Brotherhood and other opposition groups, see "Country Backgrounder Series: Egypt," Project on Middle East Democracy, 2009, http://pomed.org/docs/Egypt_Backgrounder.pdf.

15 Interview by Hamid with Khaled Hamza, April 7, 2009

viable secular opposition parties as alternatives.[16] They too have suffered from the closing of political space, with the once-promising Kifaya movement and liberal al-Ghad party in Egypt shadows of their former selves. Without such alternatives, a more effective policy toward Islamist parties is needed to break the current stalemate.

IV. U.S. and EU Policies Toward Political Islam

The United States and its European allies have been paralyzed by what some analysts call the "Islamist dilemma": Western nations, particularly since the end of the Cold War, have had a stated moral and strategic interest in supporting democracy abroad. In Eastern Europe and Latin America, this has been reflected in discrete policy initiatives, many of them relatively successful. Yet the Middle East remains "exceptional." Democratic openings are feared for what they may bring: namely Islamist groups perceived to be anti-American and anti-Israel.

"Despite this fear of Islamists coming to power through free elections, successive U.S. administrations have at various points maintained contacts with Islamist opposition groups."

In what Robert Satloff calls the "founding text of U.S. policy on the issue [of political Islam]," Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Edward Djerejian, said in 1992 that the "United States government does not view Islam as the next 'ism' confronting the West" but added the important caveat that "while we believe in the principle of one person, one vote, we do not support 'one person, one vote, one time,'" a reference to the oft-cited fear that Islamists will win elections and then refuse to give up power (a scenario which has never in fact occurred).[17] In 1994, James Baker, who had been Secretary of State at the time of the Islamic Salvation Front's 1991 election victory, explained America's unwillingness to stand behind the democratic process: "When I was at the Department [of State], we pursued a policy of excluding the radical fundamentalists in Algeria, even as we recognized that this was somewhat at odds with our support of democracy…because we felt that the radical fundamentalists' views were so adverse to what we believe in and what we support, and to what we understood the national interests of the United States to be."[18]

Despite this fear of Islamists coming to power through free elections, successive U.S. administrations have intermittently maintained contacts with Islamist opposition groups. The PJD in Morocco is one of the only Islamist opposition parties that currently enjoys formal contacts with the U.S. government. The State Department sponsored a visit by the party's then-Secretary General, Saad Eddin el-Othmani to

16 In Jordan, one of the more Westernized Arab countries, secular parties do not currently have any seats in parliament.

17 Robert Satloff, "U.S. Policy Toward Islamism: A Theoretical and Operational Overview," New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2000, pp. 6-7

18 "James Baker Looks Back at the Middle East," Middle East Quarterly, Sept. 1994, vol. 1, no. 3

"After 9/11, the question of democratic reform in the Middle East assumed greater urgency, as the Bush administration asserted a causal link between the lack of democracy in the region and the rise of terrorism."

Washington, DC in May 2006. Earlier in 2003, after the May terrorist attacks in Casablanca, when some in the government were considering dissolving the PJD, the U.S. embassy strongly opposed any such move.[19] However, even in Morocco, the United States remains unwilling to exert strong pressure on the regime to democratize, presumably out of concern for stability and regional interests, which it feels are better served by the monarchy than by whoever might win fully free elections. The legal Islamist opposition is allowed a substantial portion of parliamentary seats but – despite winning a plurality of the vote in 2007 – is not permitted to play any significant governing role. Everyone appears willing to play by these rules, and accept the resulting political stalemate. Insofar as the U.S. engages with the PJD, it does so with the Moroccan monarchy's blessing.

In Yemen, there have been informal and formal contacts between the American Embassy and the Islah party, the largest opposition group in the country. Meanwhile, in Jordan, IAF leaders met with U.S. Special Coordinator for Public Diplomacy, Ambassador Christopher Ross in 2002, [20] but the IAF instituted a formal ban on official contacts with the U.S. government in 2004 in protest of the Iraq war.

Debates surrounding Islamist engagement have preoccupied policymakers for at least two decades. The U.S. government initiated low-level contacts with the Algerian Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) in the early-to-mid 1990s. Anwar Haddam, the exiled FIS representative who took part in these talks, was permitted to take up residence in Washington, DC. At around the same time, out of fear that the Egyptian government would soon fall to an armed insurgency, the Clinton administration initiated low-level dialogue with the Muslim Brotherhood, which was seen as an alternative to violent extremists, on one hand, and an apparently weak regime, on the other.[21] However, when Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak found out about the talks, he insisted that the U.S. immediately cease all contact.

Under the Clinton administration, fundamental political change in the Middle East was seen as too risky, particularly with attention focused on sensitive negotiations between the Israelis and Palestinians. But after 9/11, the question of democratic reform in the Middle East assumed greater urgency, as the Bush administration asserted a causal link between the lack of democracy in the region and the rise of terrorism. In 2005, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice told an Egyptian audience that "things have changed. We had a very rude awakening on September 11th, when I think we realized that our policies to try and promote what we thought was

19 Samir Amghar, "Morocco," in Political Islam and European Foreign Policy: Perspectives from Muslim Democrats of the Mediterranean, ed. Michael Emerson and Richard Youngs (Brussels: Center for European Policy Studies, 2007), p. 27

20 *Jordan Times*, July 26, 2002

21 Fawaz Gerges, *America and Political Islam: Clash of Cultures or Clash of Interests* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999)

stability in the Middle East had actually allowed, underneath, a very malignant, meaning cancerous, form of extremism to grow up underneath because people didn't have outlets for their political views."[22] In a 2003 Washington Quarterly article, Richard Haass, director of policy planning at the State Department, addressed the Islamist dilemma in a refreshingly forthright manner: "Some have argued that the US is prepared only to support electoral outcomes that please Washington, which is untrue. The US will support democratic processes even if those empowered do not choose policies strategically in line with US interests…Let there be no misunderstanding: the US is not opposed to parties with an Islamic character in positions of responsibility."[23] Yet, as Islamist groups began making electoral gains throughout the region, in Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Morocco, and Lebanon, the enthusiasm of American policymakers waned. The Bush administration was weary of putting pressure on authoritarian allies, whose help was increasingly needed to deal with a worsening political situation in Iraq and the growing influence of Iran and Syria.

"It is ironic that engaging with some of America's most avowed enemies is on the table, yet the U.S. has not moved to open formal contacts with groups that have long committed to nonviolence and democratic participation..."

It is an open question what the election of President Barack Obama will mean for the future of U.S.-Islamist dialogue. At this early stage, it appears an emerging theme is the need to incorporate violent, extremist Islamist groups in nonviolent, democratic processes. General David Petraeus, Commander of U.S. Central Command, is exploring replicating the U.S.'s successful policy of co-opting Iraqi insurgents with "moderate elements" of the Afghan Taliban. Meanwhile, senior Obama administration officials appear to be supportive of unity talks between Fatah and Hamas.

It is ironic that engaging with some of America's most avowed enemies is on the table, yet the U.S. has not moved to open formal contacts with groups that have long committed to nonviolence and democratic participation such as the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, the world's most influential nonviolent Islamist group. As Secretary Rice explained in response to a question after a June 2005 speech in Cairo, "we have not engaged with the Muslim Brotherhood. And we won't."[24] It remains to be seen whether we will.

The European Union

The reaction of European governments to the military coup in Algeria varied between indifference and active support. Considering Europe's, and in particular France's, influence in North Africa, the Algerian episode has long provided an

22 "Question and Answer at the American University of Cairo," Cairo, Egypt, June 20, 2005. Available online at http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2005/48352.htm

23 Richard Haas, "Toward Greater Democracy in the Muslim World," Washington Quarterly, Summer 2003, p. 143

24 "An Interpretation of Rice's Policy Speech at AUC," The Arabist, http://arabist.net/archives/2005/06/20/an-interpretation-of-rices-policy-speech-at-auc/

"Lacking an overarching framework for EU-level engagement, and with the failure of the EMP and ENP to involve Islamist actors and organizations, most European engagement has taken place on an ad-hoc bilateral level."

ample reservoir of mistrust, making EU-Islamist engagement considerably more difficult. "Unsurprisingly," Amel Boubekeur writes, "the common view is that the EU actively collaborated in the repression of Algerian Islamists' democratic rights."[25]

Direct engagement with Islamist groups, notes Kristina Kausch, had "typically been a no-go for European governments."[26] Unlike the United States, which released several policy statements on political Islam throughout the 1990s, the European Union and member states only began addressing the issue more substantively after September 11. In recent years, there have been some efforts to consider new approaches. The EU Strategy for Combating Radicalization and Recruitment to Terrorism, for instance, states: "We need to empower moderate voices by engaging with Muslim organizations and faith groups that reject the distorted version of Islam put forward by al-Qa'ida and others."[27] The European Parliament was more explicit in its 2007 Resolution on Reforms in the Arab World, calling for Europe to "give visible political support to…those political organizations which promote democracy by non-violent means…including, where appropriate, secular actors and moderate Islamists."[28]

But such statements have not translated into changes in policy. Take for example the "Task Force on Political Islam," set up in the European Commission's Directorate General for External Relations. The group's attempts to draft a common set of principles for engagement with nonviolent Islamist groups were ultimately abandoned amidst widespread opposition.[29] Lacking an overarching framework for EU-level engagement, and with the failure of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership and European Neighborhood Policy to involve Islamist actors and organizations, most European engagement has taken place on an ad-hoc bilateral level. Countries like Britain and Germany with large Muslim immigrant populations have taken the lead, establishing divisions within their foreign offices focused on political Islam.[30] Despite these efforts, European approaches are disconnected and vary widely based on individual states' interests.

The EU and U.S. diverge on policies toward militant Islamist groups like Hezbol-

25 Amel Boubekeur, *"Algeria," in Political Islam and European Foreign Policy: Perspectives from Muslim Democrats of the Mediterranean*, ed. Michael Emerson and Richard Youngs (Brussels: Center for European Policy Studies, 2007), p. 39

26 Kristina Kausch, "Plus ca change: Europe's Engagement with Moderate Islamists," FRIDE Working Paper, January 2009, p. 1

27 Ibid, p. 5

28 "Resolution on Reforms in the Arab World: What strategy should the European Union adopt?" European Parliament, May 10 2007, http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+TA+P6-TA-2007-0179+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN&language=EN 0179+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN&language=EN

29 Kausch, pp. 5-6

30 Ibid, pp. 8, 10

lah and Hamas. The EU has no formal terrorism designation for Hezbollah and member states have resisted pressure from the U.S. Congress to halt contact with Hezbollah. France supports rapprochement with Hezbollah, while Germany has had intermittent contacts, most notably in negotiating prisoner swaps between Israel and the militant group in 1996 and 2004.[31] Britain announced in March 2009 it would engage in direct talks with Hezbollah. As a government spokesman explained: "Our aim is to encourage Hezbollah to stay away from violence and play a constructive, peaceful and democratic role in Lebanese politics."

Officially, the EU does not communicate with Hamas. However, over the past year, there has been a softening in the European position, with France admitting to having had contacts with the group. British, Italian, and Greek members of parliament have met with Hamas officials in early 2009. Despite increasing international pressure to alter its position, the United States, under both the Bush and Obama administrations, has so far refused to talk to Hamas until it renounces violence and recognizes Israel.

V. The Way Forward

"Dialogue is not a goal in and of itself but rather a means to particular strategic ends."

Dialogue is not a goal in and of itself but rather a means to particular strategic ends. There are, in our view, four main purposes of engaging with Islamists.

Information gathering. According to Kausch, EU diplomats often cite this rationale for low-level contacts.[32] The aim is to speak with diverse opposition groups in order to gauge political conditions on the ground.

Public diplomacy. Western governments can improve their image in the eyes of Arabs and Muslims by demonstrating a willingness to engage popular opposition movements. Pursuing dialogue with Islamists softens the edge of their anti-Western statements and policies, as the more conciliatory rhetoric of the PJD shows.[33] With Islamist groups commanding sizable constituencies, their attitudes toward Western countries influence their large number of supporters. In Europe, this is relevant for Arab and Muslim immigrant communities that retain political ties to their home countries. Islamist groups, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood, enjoy a strong European presence through branches and affiliates in France, Germany, Britain, and elsewhere.[34]

31 Kausch, p. 13

32 Ibid, p. 3

33 Amel Boubekeur and Samir Amghar, "Islamist Parties in the Maghreb and Their Links with EU: Mutual Influences and the Dynamics of Democratization," EuroMesco Paper, October 2006, p. 25

34 For more on the European branches of the Muslim Brotherhood, see Robert Leiken and Steven Brooke, "The Moderate Muslim Brotherhood," Foreign Affairs, March/April 2007, http://www.nixoncenter.org/publications/LeikenBrookeMB.pdf

"Low-level contacts are becoming more common but are unlikely to be productive beyond obtaining information."

Supporting democracy. Islamist engagement can be a means to support democratization. First, talking with Islamist groups demonstrates that Western governments are serious about democracy assistance, essentially calling the bluff of regimes which benefit from the perception that they are the only alternative to Islamic fundamentalists. Second, engagement allows Western governments to help Islamist parties more effectively – and peacefully – contest authoritarian regimes by assisting with platform development, message training, opinion polling, and parliamentary strategy. This is the type of support that US-funded organizations like the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and the International Republican Institute (IRI) already offer to legal parties in several Arab countries. Third, knowing they have Western governments support their right to participate, Islamist groups will be more willing to put pressure on regimes through nonviolent protests. Lastly, Western involvement can be decisive in bringing opposition parties of diverse ideological stripes together. The groundbreaking alliance between the Islamist Islah Party and staunchly secularist Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP) around a compromise presidential candidate in the 2006 elections "was a direct result of meetings coordinated by the National Democratic Institute."[35] If NDI, a U.S.-funded nongovernmental organization, is able to play this kind of positive role with limited resources, it is certainly possible that American and European governments, either through direct or indirect involvement, can play a larger, more sustained role in Yemen, as well as in other strategically vital countries.

Securing Interests. Authoritarian regimes may be less stable than they appear. Engaging popular Islamist movements is a way to prepare for the inevitability that existing regimes will eventually be replaced with an uncertain "something else." If there are either free elections or mass nonviolent protest movements as occurred in Eastern Europe, Islamists are the ones most likely to benefit from political openings. It is better to have leverage with Islamist groups before they come to power; afterwards may be too late. A "strategic dialogue" allows Western governments to influence Islamist groups to respect regional security interests, including Israeli security, Iraqi stability, and combating terrorist groups.

The extent and depth of Western countries' engagement hinges on which of these rationales is most relevant to their national interests. We distinguish between three levels of engagement: low-level contacts, strategic dialogue, and partnership. The first two rationales of information-gathering and public diplomacy suggest low-level contacts. The last two rationales of supporting democracy and securing interests require either a strategic dialogue or partnership. Strategic dialogue entails the two sides discussing priorities to see how they can assist each other in certain areas. Partnership would entail a higher level of bilateral relations, per-

35 Michalle Browers, "Origins and Architects of Yemen's Joint Meeting Parties," International Journal of Middle East Studies 39, p. 578

haps at the ambassadorial or ministerial level, with more formalized cooperation through active political support and funding.

For now, formal partnerships would be difficult to pursue in most Middle Eastern contexts. Low-level contacts are becoming more common but are unlikely to be productive beyond obtaining information. Thus, a strategic dialogue with Islamists provides a middle ground that is both practicable in the short-term and capable of serving all four of the objectives listed above.

The U.S. and EU are likely to differ in some respects with regard to strategies for engaging political Islam in the coming years. Zoé Nautré comments that "[European] engagement is more about observing, it's about gaining knowledge…the U.S. has been perceived as pushing for something, as having a clear agenda."[36] Successive American administrations have been committed, at least rhetorically, to supporting democracy in the Middle East. Those in the Washington policy community, who tend to see authoritarian systems as inherently transient, are more likely to see engaging Islamists as a way to either promote democratic reform or to have an "insurance policy" in case Islamists come to power.

Nonetheless, the U.S. and EU can begin developing a common line on groups that are nonviolent and committed to the democratic process. This may simply mean, initially, supporting in principle the right of Islamists to peacefully participate in political life and more consistently condemning human rights abuses against Islamists and secularists alike. In addition, they can integrate Islamist political and civil society groups in their existing Middle East programming, such as MEPI and the ENP. From there, individual governments will likely adopt varying strategies based on domestic contexts, regional interests, and strategic objectives.

36 "Strategies for Engaging Political Islam: A Middle East, U.S. and EU 'Trialogue,'" Event, February 26, 2009

FRIEDRICH EBERT STIFTUNG

www.fesdc.org

PROJECT *on* Middle East Democracy

www.pomed.org