ISLAMIST MOVEMENTS AND THE ARAB SPRING

*Abdullah al-Arian**

Abstract: The Arab uprisings of 2011, popularly known as the Arab Spring, were first initiated by a broad range of movements shaped primarily by a non-ideological sense of civic identity. As the uprisings gained momentum, however, Islamist groups were able to utilise their organisational strength and mobilisation capabilities to position themselves at the centre of this watershed moment in modern Middle Eastern history. This article examines the role Islamism came to play in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, notably in the reformulation of the norms of regional governance as authoritarian rule appeared poised to be replaced by a system rooted in democratic legitimacy, independent institutions, and a redefined relationship between the state and its citizens. The article begins with a consideration of the evolution of political Islam in the Arab world, from its origins as a significant social movement actor to its various attempts at political engagement with the state. The article then proceeds to a more explicit examine of both political Islam's role in the Arab Spring and its apparent intentions for the post-authoritarian order. It is argued that, since the Arab uprisings took place, many Islamist groups have abandoned abstract slogans in favour of coherent political platforms concerned with, amongst other things, the role of Islam in a revised constitution and determining the powers and responsibilities of state institutions. Looking ahead to long-term trends, the interpretation of Shari'ah, understanding the nature of the civil state, and the shape of democratic participation appear set to become crucial issues within Islamist discourse. The realities of rule, requiring pragmatism and compromise, will almost certainly challenge the ideological orientation of political Islam in the coming years, as Islamists come to realise that political survival is predicated not on ideological purity but on practical results.

Keywords: The Arab Spring, political Islam, the Arab World, democracy, authoritarianism, reform, the Muslim Brotherhood.

In late 2010, the Egyptian regime of Hosni Mubarak held parliamentary elections that were reported to involve widespread voter intimidation, fraud, and vote rigging.¹ The country's leading opposition movement, the Muslim Brotherhood, saw its largest ever presence in Egypt's legislative body—eighty-eight members elected in 2005—dwindle to single digits. By the end of the year, due to the regime's constitutional amendments aimed at excluding the opposition, coupled

with its effective consolidation of power through the latest round of parliamentary elections, the Muslim Brotherhood was said to have been “reduced to political nonexistence.”² Yet barely two months later, as the tide of revolution was sweeping aside the decades-old authoritarian regimes across the Arab world, the Muslim Brotherhood and its regional offshoots rapidly emerged as the likely successors to the long-standing secular rulers. That they were in this position largely as a result of their effective participation in the democratic process was not lost on most observers, even those traditionally critical of Islamist movements.³

Indeed, from Tunisia to Yemen, and even among those regimes that emerged from the wave of popular protests seemingly unscathed, the looming question concerns the role that Islamist movements are poised to play in the reformulation of the norms of regional governance. This process entails a transition from a system based on the tenuous arrangements between semi-authoritarian rulers and their subjects to one rooted in democratic legitimacy, independent institutions, and a redefined relationship between the state and its citizens. The future status of religious norms, and Islamic law or the sharia in particular, is central to this transition.

In order to address this question, the following pages chart the evolution of political Islam in the Arab world, beginning with its historical development as a significant social movement actor, while highlighting its various attempts at political engagement with the state. The decades of experience gained by groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood provide a rich pool of data from which conclusions can be drawn regarding the movement’s posture in a post-authoritarian setting. Moreover, Islamist groups have a long record of democratic participation, albeit within a severely constrained political system, which provides some indication of this movement’s goals and strategies in an open and democratic environment.

A secondary area of focus centers on the events of the Arab uprisings themselves and the conduct of the Islamist movements during this period. Though the weeks and months of protests that resulted in the ouster of long-standing regime heads in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, and Yemen signify a watershed moment in the region’s history, this period is perhaps equally notable for solidifying the transformation of Islamist groups—long considered to be revolutionary forces in Arab societies—into reform-minded organisations that had found some accommodation with the region’s authoritarian regimes. Thus, with some notable exceptions, the role of Islamic politics in the crucial events of the Arab uprisings appears to have been largely muted, drowned out by a broader protest movement shaped by a non-ideological civic identity. Yet while they may not have played an initial leadership role, Islamic movements broadened the scope of their missions and adopted the popular refrain of “dignity, freedom, and social justice,” around

which millions of fellow citizens had united. Once these groups had employed their organisational strength and their capacity to mobilise supporters, the outcome of the popular revolts appeared to be far less uncertain.

Aside from their actions at the height of the protests to oust the regimes, the performance of Islamist movements in the transitional period that followed should be treated as a separate analytical category. The primary distinction between the two is, on the one hand, the pursuit of a common national objective around which all political factions were united, and the subsequent attempts to marshal support behind a particular political agenda, and indeed, to impose a distinct vision for the post-authoritarian order. This can be observed in Egypt, for instance, where, scarcely four weeks after Mubarak's removal, the Muslim Brotherhood found itself at odds with the country's other political forces over the very structure of the transitional period, preferring to hold legislative and presidential elections ahead of the task of rewriting the constitution.

It is the behavior of Islamist movements during the transitional period that provides the best insight into their vision for a post-authoritarian ruling order. It was during this critical historical moment that many such groups established official political parties for the first time, abandoned abstract slogans in favor of coherent political platforms, wrangled over the role of Islam in a revised constitution, and attempted to shape the powers and responsibilities of state institutions. The post-uprising period also witnessed the culmination of long-standing democratic participation (or attempts at it) by Islamist groups, and sealed the transition from broad social work to full-fledged political activism.

Finally, moving beyond the turbulence of the post-uprising settlement, it is useful to look ahead at the long-term trends developing out of the contributions of Islamist movements to the emerging governance structures across the Arab world. Specifically, the interpretations of the sharia (whether expansive or limited), the understanding of the nature of the civil state, and the shape of democratic participation will ultimately define future modes of governance. Moreover, just as the impact of Islamist movements on the state is subject to scrutiny, one can also examine the effects of governance on the movements themselves. The transformation from mass movement to political party will undoubtedly exacerbate the tension between these groups' quest for political power and their traditional social mission, while the need for greater pragmatism and compromise at the root of effective democratic governance will almost certainly challenge the ideological orientation of Islamic movements. The recent setbacks these movements have experienced following the resumption of state repression are certain to usher in an era in which the durability and utility of Islamist politics will undergo renewed scrutiny.

Reclaiming the Goals of the Faith

In attempting to explain the rise of the Islamic movement in Sudan during the early twentieth century, Abdelwahab El-Affendi posed the following question: “Why was it necessary to remind Muslims to abide by the faith they profess? Simple inertia should have dictated that Muslims should stick to their own lifestyles unless pressured to abandon them. We should not be asking why Muslims want to live as Muslims, but what reasons prevented them from doing so before.”⁴ The prevalent narrative among Islamist groups across the Arab world presents political Islam as the latest incarnation of the religious revivalist movements that erupted during the period of political and economic decline associated with the late Ottoman era and the rise of European colonialism. Shortly before he founded the Muslim Brotherhood in 1928, Hasan al-Banna identified an inherent conflict in the relationship between traditional Islamic norms and European colonial rule: “I believe that my people, because of the political stages through which they have passed, the social influences which have passed through them, and under the impact of western civilization ... materialist philosophy, and foreign traditions, have departed from the goals of their faith.”⁵

The movement he founded proceeded to address this concern, establishing a modern social organisation with a strong missionary component. The Society of the Muslim Brothers promoted the reclamation of traditional Islamic values within a modern state setting. While it quickly spread across the Arabic-speaking parts of a fallen empire still reeling from the loss of the caliphate—the symbol of Islamic political and spiritual leadership for thirteen centuries—the movement nonetheless demonstrated an ability to adapt to local conditions. It successfully navigated the modern institutions that had developed in the individual Arab states, obtaining official government sanction, generating the funds and resources necessary to sustain its mission, and developing complex relationships with the various state organs that it was attempting to influence or replace.

With its universalistic Islamic message, the Muslim Brotherhood focused on recruiting members from all segments of society. Banna put forward a twofold strategy of reforming the individual through the internalisation of Islamic norms and values in all aspects of one’s life, which was to be followed by a broad-based public campaign for the rehabilitation of society’s governing structures and institutions, a far more political goal. With a legion of highly motivated followers, a strong hierarchical structure suited for mass mobilisation, and a powerful message that pledged self-empowerment and the reclamation of Islam’s once ascendant place in society, the Muslim Brotherhood launched itself into the chaotic field of interwar Arab politics. Despite the fierce opposition of the state’s

colonial rulers and political elites, Islamic politics made inroads in Egypt, Syria, Sudan, Jordan, and Tunisia, among other countries.

In Egypt, Banna managed to gain some concessions regarding public morality laws from the Wafdist government. In Jordan, the Muslim Brotherhood established strong links with the monarchy as a bulwark against leftist movements, while in Syria, members of the Brotherhood were elected to a number of parliamentary seats in Damascus in the 1950s. In all Arab countries in which it maintained a prominent voice, the Islamist movement led the opposition to the colonisation and division of historical Palestine, and became a critical player both in the war that erupted in 1948 and in trying to mitigate the refugee crisis that followed.

Whether on issues of domestic social policy or foreign affairs, forces of Islamic activism put forth a comprehensive vision of politics that centered on the application of religious principles, specifically those derived from the sharia, the Islamic legal tradition. However, by and large, successive governments attempted to subvert the role of religion in the state, preferring a secular model promoted externally by former colonial powers and internally through recently elevated institutions like the military or local monarchies supported by secular elites. The Muslim Brotherhood and its regional offshoots consequently faced official banishment and persecution in countries such as Egypt, Syria, Tunisia, and Libya, while being co-opted to the whims of the state in the cases of Jordan, Yemen, and Sudan.

Locating the Center

From its origins in the early part of the century through the 1960s, the modern Islamist movement was unable to gain a great deal of political experience. The primary *modus operandi* of Islamic groups, after all, was activism within society through popular religious, social, and charitable institutions rather than direct engagement in political participation. As Rachid al-Ghannouchi, the leader of Tunisia's al-Nahda movement characterised it, contrary to the historical Western fixation on liberating the state from religion, "in our context the problem is one of liberating religion from the state and preventing it from dominating religion, and keeping the latter in the societal realm."⁶ It was only upon recognising the pervasive role of the modern state in regulating the lives of citizens, including the freedom to live according to their interpretation of Islam, that Islamist groups saw political action as necessary for achieving their broader objectives.

In attempting to resolve this perceived conflict, the leaders of the Islamist movement failed to reconcile the tensions inherent in a project to reassert traditional religious values within the demands of a modern state system. Banna

famously rejected the “partisanship” of adversarial, representative parliamentary politics on the grounds that it was un-Islamic. However, when the need arose to shift the Muslim Brotherhood’s political tactics in the 1940s, Banna authorised members to run for parliament and even stood as a candidate himself in two separate elections. While this move did not signal a definitive shift in the trajectory of the Islamist movement, it nonetheless indicated that difficult questions had yet to be answered about the nature of Islamic activism’s relationship with the modern instruments of governance.

The ensuing decades were marked by the forced retreat of Islamism as secular Arab nationalism and conservative monarchies reigned supreme. It was not until the mid-1970s that these questions were revisited, coinciding with the re-emergence of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and elsewhere, within a more crowded field of religious activism that included, among others, the Salafi, Sufi, Tablighi, and jihadi trends. Political Islam’s engagement with the state, now rejuvenated by a new generation of cosmopolitan youth activists disenchanted by the failures of the Arab nationalist project, subsequently resumed on a large scale. In places such as Egypt, where conditions permitted, this engagement began with entry into leadership roles within the student unions of state colleges and universities, before expanding into professional bodies and eventually the parliament.

Though the Muslim Brotherhood remained officially outlawed, its leaders embraced the reformist path in the face of pressure from the militant fringe of the Islamic movement which was calling for violent revolutionary modes of opposing the Sadat regime. In denouncing this approach, Muslim Brotherhood leaders like Hasan al-Hudaybi and ‘Umar al-Tilmisani affirmed the organisation’s commitment to fulfilling the movement’s goals from within the state’s existing institutions rather than by replacing them. Subsequent generations continued to develop the mainstream political ideology, with the result that, by the 1980s and 1990s, democratic participation had become part and parcel of Islamic activism from Algeria to Kuwait. By the mid-1990s, the moderate mainstream was further distinguished from competing trends with the rise of the *wasatiyyah* movement which proclaimed a centrist approach to Islamic politics that stressed the need to implement the spirit of the sharia, defined by the *maqasid*, or objectives, rather than the letter, expressed in the *ahkam*, or rulings. Building on the thought of intellectual luminaries such as Yusuf al-Qaradawi and Muhammad al-Ghazali, the *wasatiyyah* movement became a driving force behind the shift from militant activism toward greater political engagement, even yielding a political party in Egypt of the same name.⁷

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, Islamic political movements appeared to have consolidated their gains, joining the ruling governments in

Lebanon and Palestine while winning their largest ever share of parliamentary seats in semi-authoritarian systems such as Egypt, Jordan, and Kuwait. Even in closed political systems such as Tunisia, Libya, and Syria, exiled Islamist leaders began to conceive of a more pragmatic political course while charting their path to the future. Commentators observing this phenomenon began to speak of a “post-Islamist” transformation in Arab politics, in which traditional movements adopted the same language, strategies, and modes of contestation as non-religious political parties. According to Bayat, post-Islamism “represents an endeavor to fuse religiosity and rights, faith and freedom, Islam and liberty. It is an attempt to turn the underlying principles of Islamism on its head by emphasising rights instead of duties, plurality in place of singular authoritative voice, historicity rather than fixed scripture, and the future instead of the past.”⁸ However, as soon as the Islamist movement had settled the most pressing questions regarding its goals and methods, it found itself at a critical historical juncture that would both challenge and affirm its reformist agenda and universalistic mission.

Freedom is the Solution

On the eve of the popular uprisings that began in Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia, in December 2010, the Islamist movement in the Arab world had undergone an extensive transformation—from being an organic societal force with the potential for revolutionary action against repressive secular regimes, the Islamist movement was now a reformist political actor that had adapted to the rules of the political game imposed by those same regimes and their patrons. The Muslim Brotherhood had all but abandoned its traditional refrain of “Islam is the solution” in favor of the far more universal “freedom is the solution.”⁹ But while these words may have dictated its electoral strategy in Egypt in 2005, when it sought to obtain a greater share of policy-making responsibilities under the Mubarak regime, they would subsequently take on an entirely new meaning during the height of the anti-regime protests in late January 2011.

From the outset of the Arab uprisings, much of the commentary in the Western press and academia stressed the spontaneous, unified, and non-ideological nature of the protests. In both explicit and implicit terms, this analysis attempted to demonstrate that Islamist movements—long thought to be the only viable alternative to secular dictatorships—had given way to a new phenomenon: the rise of a highly educated, cosmopolitan youth movement with a laudable commitment to non-violent protest, democratic reform, and personal freedoms. The pervasive use of social media, the flurry of images beamed from the public squares of Tunis, Cairo, and Sana‘a, and the availability of English-speaking youth protestors to

Western journalists greatly aided the construction of a narrative that supplanted political Islam's decades-long fixation on replacing secular regimes with a religious state. Instead, a new generation raised the banners of social justice and human dignity, overcoming the narrow ideological interests of competing social movements to offer a universal message to which all citizens could relate.

The events of the Arab uprisings did not emerge in a vacuum. The decade preceding the Arab Spring was rife with popular protests against government corruption and abuses across the region. Ad hoc coalitions were established, such as the Kefaya and April 6 movements in Egypt and the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP) in Yemen, which called for an end to the hereditary project of the regimes and for the creation of democratic institutions. The nature of popular opposition in parts of the Arab world had seemingly evolved to emphasise civic identity at the expense of religious and ethnic group affiliation.

This development was perhaps nowhere more evident than in the conduct of the youth movement within the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. Although the organisation itself had made a conscious decision not to join in the protests scheduled for 25 January, young leaders such as Islam Lotfi and Muhammad 'Abbas, along with thousands of other Muslim Brotherhood members, were determined to participate in the marches to Tahrir Square. They believed that their identity as conscientious and proud Egyptian citizens trumped their membership in the Muslim Brotherhood and their obligation to observe the directives of its senior leadership.¹⁰ However, these youth were equally as likely to stress that their decision to join the uprising did not emerge out of some newfound discovery of secular nationalism, but rather out of their belief in a cosmopolitan Islamism that views religious politics as a means to establish justice and social harmony.

As a natural outgrowth of the *wasatiyya* movement of the 1990s, this cosmopolitan Islamism offers a non-exclusivist vision that transcends the traditional view of religious activism as a distinct project operating in tension with broader social and political forces, from notions of the civil state to nationalism. As stated by 'Abd al-Mon'eim Abul Futuh, a former Muslim Brotherhood leader who left the group upon announcing his candidacy for president in April 2011, this vision is

an extension of the broader Egyptian national project, internalizing in a modern way the greatness of the principles and values of Islam, in which all Egyptians take pride, whether Muslim or Christian these values were developed by such figures as Rifa'a al-Tahtawi, Sa'ad Zaghloul, Muhammad Abduh, and Rashid Rida. As a political leader, Sa'ad Zaghloul was still the son of al-Azhar, and Tahtawi and others never abandoned the principles of Islamic civilization.¹¹

In contrast to earlier modes of protest, in which sharp lines of identification were drawn, it was not uncommon during the Arab Spring to witness Islamist youth chanting religious and nationalist slogans in the same breath. Indeed, in a nod to their newfound comfort with state symbols, the political rallies of several major Islamist parties were strewn with Egyptian flags and frequently began with the playing of the national anthem—a far cry from the designation of such practices as a deviation from true Islam.

However, even as the redefinition of Islamist identity was developing among the younger generation of activists, the fact remains that, in virtually every case, the senior leadership of these movements opted not to lead the charge to overthrow dictatorial regimes. This decision was a product of several factors. The historical relationship between Islamist groups and the country's rulers was characterised by a legacy of conflict and severe repression that had nearly destroyed the movement's presence at every turn. Sheer survival instinct dictated that Islamist groups could ill afford to jeopardise their gains, however limited they may have been, by engaging in a revolutionary struggle.

This historical experience of repression necessitated a strategic shift on the part of the leadership of these groups (which dated back to the 1970s), and as the relative political gains increased, this need only became stronger over time. Whether in Egypt, Jordan, or Yemen, the Muslim Brotherhood appeared to have more to lose by joining what was quickly becoming a zero-sum revolutionary moment. If this legacy were not enough, the Mubarak regime's security forces were sure to remind the Muslim Brotherhood of the risks involved, as it conducted wide-ranging sweeps to detain several members of the group's leadership, including Mohamed Morsi, during the initial stage of the protests.

However, in the cases of Tunisia and Libya, the long-term imprisonment and exile of the Islamist movement's senior leadership ensured that its capacity to mobilise followers and sympathisers would be extremely limited. Ghannouchi, who established al-Nahda in the mid-1980s, had been exiled from Tunisia for twenty-two years when he eventually returned from Europe after the fall of Ben Ali. As a result, the Tunisian protest movement did not claim to represent an Islamist agenda, but it also did not explicitly disavow what was a popular undercurrent that existed within Tunisian society in spite of the repressive political atmosphere. Reacting to the fact that Tunisia's revolution lacked a discernible ideological orientation, Ghannouchi claimed that: "No one can pretend that this revolution has been led by Islamists or communists or any other group for that matter. This is a popular revolution and all the trends in Tunisian political society are present on the scene. At the same time it is clear that the Islamists are the biggest political force in Tunisia."¹²

The situation in Libya on the eve of the uprising was even more complex, as the Islamist movement was divided between an exiled leadership that saw no possible accommodation with the regime and an internal movement that wavered between suffering long-term imprisonment and attempting to reach a negotiated settlement with the ruler's son, Saif al-Islam al-Qaddafi.¹³ As the violent confrontation with Qaddafi's forces escalated during the early months of the popular uprising, the leaders of the Libyan Islamist movement attempted to hedge their bets, refusing to endorse the uprising fully while simultaneously avoiding making any commitment to the regime's survival.

Another factor considered by the leadership of Islamist groups concerned the perception that their involvement would create among those Western countries whose response to the Arab uprisings could prove critical in terms of their ultimate success or failure. The fact that dictatorial regimes across the region had relied heavily on the support of the United States and its allies for decades was not lost on the protestors or movement leaders. Given the overt hostility expressed by Western policy-makers toward Islamist movements, particularly in the post-Cold War period, the Muslim Brotherhood's leadership believed that any vociferous endorsement for the anti-Mubarak protests would be interpreted as an attempt at an Islamic revolution in Egypt.¹⁴ Members of the Brotherhood did not, after all, have to look too far back into history to witness a US response to an actual Islamic revolution, given the events which had occurred in Iran only three decades earlier. Similarly, in Libya, where foreign intervention would prove critical to the defeat of Qaddafi, Islamist leaders were mindful of creating the appearance that their movement was at the forefront of the revolution, something which would alarm their Western patrons and jeopardise the support of NATO. The same logic was also at play in the formation of the resistance to the Assad regime, as the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood's exiled leadership attempted to maintain a low profile to avoid giving the impression that the revolt in Syria was religious in nature. In a country with a recent political history of polarisation and divisions along sectarian lines, the struggle against a minority Alawite regime could not be seen as being led by a religiously oriented Sunni movement.

Joining the Fray

As a result of these ideological and tactical considerations, Islamist movements remained peripheral to the initial stages of the uprisings. In Egypt, internal discussions within the Muslim Brotherhood's Guidance Bureau on 21 January yielded a decision not to engage in the planned protests as an organisation, but also not to bar members from participating on an individual basis if they chose to do so. This decision was at least partly based on threats that had been delivered

privately to the Muslim Brotherhood's leadership by state security officials, according to which any active participation in the protests by the organisation would be met with a swift and brutal response.¹⁵

Yet in Tunisia as well as in Egypt, whose uprisings to overthrow the ruling families lasted only twenty-eight and eighteen days respectively, the lack of institutional backing from Islamist groups did not adversely impact the outcome. In both cases, the emphasis on popular protests in public spaces throughout the country and the relatively mild response from the state security agency (at least when compared with the more violent military response in other countries) ensured the success of the uprising despite the absence of a disciplined and hierarchical organisation at the helm. If the goals of the protests continued to evolve throughout those weeks, so did the position of the leading Islamist movement. During particularly critical stages, when the outcome was far from certain, the Muslim Brotherhood's institutional support became critical to withstand the tide of state repression and significantly affect the outcome of the popular uprising.

Following the initial days of the uprising, the Guidance Bureau decided to place its organisational weight behind the protests, specifically by mobilising its members and their families to rally to the support of those gathered in public places, to set up a field office for gathering real-time information on developments, and to occupy Tahrir Square and hold it against efforts by security forces to expel the protestors.¹⁶ By the time the so-called "Battle of the Camel" took place on 2 February, the Muslim Brotherhood had gained a significant foothold within the ranks of the Egyptian protests and, indeed, its disciplined organisational capacity proved instrumental in withstanding the violent onslaught of state security forces and armed thugs as they attempted to disperse the crowds. This event was widely viewed as a turning point in the effort to overthrow Mubarak, who finally stepped down nine days later.¹⁷ In Yemen, whose uprising was at a standstill months after protestors had first occupied the country's public squares, the Islah Party played a more complex role. On the one hand, it used its institutional networks to mobilise greater support for the protests, while it sought to leverage its power in the streets for a better position at the negotiating table on the other.¹⁸ As Yemen's stillborn revolution moved to the political transition phase without successfully removing the regime's head, Islah leaders earned the ire of the revolutionaries for abandoning the protests in exchange for vastly limited political gains. Despite Islah's prominent role in cementing the presence of protestors in Change Square through the security, resources, and provisions it offered, it faced pressure from the revolutionary youth within its own ranks regarding its decision to reach a settlement with the regime.¹⁹

By contrast, events in Libya took a radically different turn. Following decades of repression and exile, and with the prospect of a civil war looming as the Qaddafi regime escalated its violent response to the peaceful protests, the Islamist movement emerged as a key actor in the ensuing conflict. Remnants of the Muslim Brotherhood as well as hard-line Salafis and jihadists were reorganised into rebel factions to fight Qaddafi's forces. One rebel commander in particular, Abdel Hakim Belhadj, earned a reputation as a fierce fighter who played a vital role in the battle for Tripoli that sent Qaddafi into hiding. Belhadj, who had formerly served as the head of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group which had challenged the regime for a number of years until its defeat in the late 1990s, resurfaced as one of the main leaders of the Islamist movement in Libya following his release from prison just months prior to the outbreak of the anti-Qaddafi protests. His growing popularity during the height of the fighting in Libya appeared to indicate a high level of support for Islamist politics among many Libyans, though it had been absent from the Libyan political scene in any organised fashion for a number of decades. The fact that Qaddafi attempted to paint the anti-regime protests as an act of terrorism only further highlighted the role played by religiously motivated Libyans who sought to rid their country of Qaddafi's rule.

Islamist groups played a similar role in Syria, another country with a long history of violent confrontation between the regime and the Muslim Brotherhood. With most of the group's leadership in exile, it was left to individual members to organise themselves during the height of the protests and mobilise along with their fellow citizens. However, as an organisation, the strength of the Islamist movement was severely limited within the country where it remained part of the oppositional Syrian National Council, which was made up of exiled leaders from various secular and religious factions. Though it did not retain the leadership of the council, the Muslim Brotherhood maintained a dominant voice nonetheless, in part due to its close relationship with Burhan Ghalioun, the council's first president. Leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood also provided extensive logistical support, with one figure reporting that "the Brotherhood does not just support with words. It might be money and it might be some tools and facilitation."²⁰ Exiled Muslim Brotherhood members used their networks in Lebanon, Turkey, and elsewhere to provide support for family members in Homs, Hama, and other major Syrian cities during the most pressing moments of the conflict. However, on an institutional level, Islamist groups remain considerably weaker than their counterparts in other Arab countries, their general popularity among Syria's more conservative population notwithstanding.

From Democracy to Islamism: The Political Transition

As the smoke settled in the aftermath of the revolutionary struggles in countries across the Arab world, the political settlement and the transition to democratic institutions featured more pronounced involvement of organised Islamist groups. In contrast to their conduct during the actual uprisings, in which they acted, at best, within a broad array of participating social actors, these groups moved quickly in an attempt to direct the outcome of this critical process. While important differences distinguish the nature of the political settlement in each local context, there are several parallel developments that can be observed across all of the cases.

From the moderate mainstream Islamist groups like the Muslim Brotherhood to the traditionally apolitical Salafis, and even former jihad-oriented organisations, the outward commitment to democracy as the basis for acquiring political legitimacy was a hallmark of the transition phase. But beyond token gestures and public platitudes, the Islamist movement demonstrated its propensity for democratic participation time and again, whether in helping to determine the rules of the game, and thereby stacking the chips in its favor, or through the effective and highly organised mobilisation of its members and supporters during elections. Additionally, during the realignment of the centers of power across various state institutions throughout the transition period, Islamist movements were committed to negotiating a more influential position within the new arrangement, though their efforts in this regard were met with differing degrees of success. Finally, the immediate aftermath of the fall of one Arab dictator after another forced an abrupt internal shift in the resource allocation of Islamist groups, as many chose to establish parties for the first time, and as a result enhanced their political credentials, but only at the expense of their social mission.

When it became apparent that the Ben Ali regime was at an end, Tunisia's Islamists moved quickly to demonstrate that their long-standing support of democratic governance was not merely an empty promise made during the height of the country's authoritarian era. The movement's leading intellectual had long served as the spokesman for Islamic democracy throughout the Muslim world, and he was quick to assert al-Nahda's continued commitment to a free, open, and democratic political system, not as a convenient political tactic, but as a principle inherent in its "mainstream" interpretation of Islamic governance. Upon his triumphant return to Tunisia, Ghannouchi declared that:

Democracy is crucial to dealing with and reconciling different and even conflicting interests in society. Islam has a strong democratic spirit inasmuch as it respects religious, social and political differences. Islam

has never favored a monolithic state. throughout their history Muslims have objected to the imposition of a single all-powerful interpretation of Islam. Any attempt to impose a single interpretation has always proven inherently unstable and temporary.²¹

The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood similarly emphasised its long- standing commitment to democratic institutions as the basis for governance. On the eve of Mubarak's fall from power, Guidance Bureau official 'Esam al-'Erian asserted: "Moving forward, we envision the establishment of a democratic, civil state that draws on universal measures of freedom and justice, which are central Islamic values. We embrace democracy not as a foreign concept that must be reconciled with tradition, but as a set of principles and objectives that are inherently compatible with and reinforce Islamic tenets."²²

The traditionally quietist Salafis proved to be particularly adept at effective political organisation. After their initial condemnation of the anti-Mubarak protests, Salafi leaders also endorsed the transition to a democratic state, albeit being careful to distinguish between a "civil" and a "secular" state, the latter of which they categorically rejected. Nonetheless, al-Nour Party leader 'Emad 'Abdel Ghaffour also spoke in the language of democracy. When describing the future Egyptian state, he explained, "We mean one that is based on democracy, the power of law and human rights. We do not want a religious state, but we also do not want the nation to be unrelated to religion."²³ Not to be outdone, Egypt's jihadist leaders, who had historically operated outside of the political system, and thus stood in stark contrast to the Muslim Brotherhood's emphasis on social activism and political contestation, signaled a complete about-face. Following his release from prison for his role in the assassination of Anwar al-Sadat, 'Abboud al-Zomor of al- Gama'ah al-Islamiyyah stated his support for the democratic process. "The ballot boxes will decide who will win at the end of the day," he said. "There is no longer any need for me to use violence against those who gave us our freedom and allowed us to be part of political life."²⁴

Libya's Belhadj also had to deflect past statements and associations related to his role in the armed resistance against the Qaddafi regime in the mid-1990s. In what was becoming a standard among Islamist groups in a new, open political environment, he espoused his support for a new Libya founded on the popular will. "We call and hope for a civil country that is ruled by the law which we were not allowed to enjoy under Gadhafi. The identity of the country will be left up to the people to choose."²⁵

By contrast, in Yemen, which had yet to rid itself fully of the Saleh regime at the time of its political transition, the Islah Party's Mohammad Qahtan downplayed the role of Islamists, instead calling for unity among competing

ideological trends within the opposition with the common goal of achieving a functioning democratic government: “We think that the need for the JMP in a post-Ali Abdullah Saleh Yemen is more pressing than ever. There is no doubt that—in light of the recent setbacks in Yemen—establishing a civil state and practicing democracy on a firm footing cannot be accomplished without a broad-based national coalition.”²⁶ Islah Party activist and Nobel Peace Prize winner Tawakkul Karman expressed a more idealistic outlook in stating her vision for a new Yemen “based on the people’s rights and on social contract between the governors and the governed through which the international values of human rights such as democracy, justice, equal citizenship, gender equality, freedom of speech, and press are respected.”²⁷ Syria’s Islamist movement, the members of which were largely based in exile, wasted no time in pledging its support for a democratic transition. Even as the bloody insurgency against the Assad regime raged on during late 2011 and early 2012, prominent leaders within the Muslim Brotherhood put forward their vision for a post-authoritarian Syria. Farouk Tayfour, its deputy leader, touted the organisation’s legacy of participating in the elections of the 1950s and 1960s, at a time when even Christians were included in its party lists.²⁸ The former head of the Muslim Brotherhood Ali al-Bayanouni echoed these sentiments for the future, writing, “All [opposition groups] would rally round a civil, plural state based on power sharing, free elections and a modern civil constitution in which all citizens—men and women—are equal. This is what the Syrians want, and what they are on course to achieve.”²⁹

Words to Deeds: Electoral Strategies and Movement Mobilisation

The ambitious pledges of the Arab world’s Islamist movements were immediately put to the test during the post-revolutionary transitions. As these groups had repeatedly declared their intention to act as merely one of many political actors within a pluralistic setting, they now faced the challenge of defining the limits of their participation in a rapidly evolving process. Due to their status as the sole organised political force representing a significant segment of society, Islamists were the only viable movement capable of determining the course of the transition, and they believed that they had the popular mandate to do so. What this process frequently entailed, however, was the establishment of institutional procedures and the delineation of road maps that appeared to privilege the nascent Islamist parties, effectively manipulating the odds in their favour. By the end of the transitional period, Islamist groups had largely cemented their role as the single most significant political actor emerging out of society. Yet along the way, they were frequently forced to reassess some of their most basic founding principles.

As a relatively homogenous society, Tunisia was able to avoid some of the more difficult moments that other Arab states faced during the post- revolutionary transition. Following Ben Ali's departure in January 2011, the country's political factions reached a consensus on a transitional process under a temporary government including of some officials of the previous regime while preparations were made for elections to the constituent assembly, which were scheduled to take place later that year. The military was relegated to the sidelines, and while protests occasionally erupted, even prompting major changes to the transitional government, the transition itself was relatively smooth.

Al-Nahda had maintained a decades-long presence within Tunisia's authoritarian political environment and was keenly aware of Tunisian society's more secular sensibilities, a fact reflected in its politically moderate tone during the electoral campaign. Moreover, its experience as a political party ensured that al-Nahda would not need to engage in the steep learning curve facing some ideologically driven social movements pressured to adopt pragmatic political platforms. Even as the Tunisian elections approached, Ghannouchi attempted to temper the expectations of its supporters, with al-Nahda making the strategic calculation not to dominate the incoming government or even to govern on an exclusively religious basis. "Islamists have to work with others," he said. "They should totally abandon the view that they can rule on their own. Furthermore, Islamists should relinquish the ambition to monopolise Islam and appear as the only voice of Islam."³⁰

When the final votes were tallied in late October 2011, al-Nahda had won 41 percent of the votes, or 89 of the 217 seats in the transitional assembly. While it was not a clear majority, the figure far exceeded the gains of all other political parties. Through its extensive network of institutions and access to public spaces such as mosques, al-Nahda's mobilisation efforts outweighed those of all competitors. The party chose to form a coalition government with several parties representing competing political trends. Representing al-Nahda in the post of prime minister was Hamadi Jebali, while the positions of president and parliamentary speaker were assumed by Moncef al-Marzouki and Mustafa Ben Ja'far, of the leftist Congress for the Republic Party and al-Takatol Party respectively.

When the coalition government set about the task of writing the nation's new constitution, it quickly faced a stumbling block on the question of Islam's role in the future Tunisian state. Whereas the former constitution stated that Islam was the state religion, some parliamentarians from al-Nahda put forward a proposal to establish sharia as the source of Tunisia's legislation, which led to an outcry from the secularist parties. The matter was eventually put to rest when al-Nahda's leadership refused to endorse the proposal, effectively killing it. Ghannouchi was particularly outspoken in his opposition to what would have amounted to no more

than a symbolic gesture, in his view, rather than a measure with any enforceable mechanism. As it was a Muslim country, he argued, government representatives were sufficiently influenced by Islamic values, whether explicitly or otherwise, and therefore did not need a provision requiring legislation to adhere to Islamic law. This decision signaled a degree of political maturity on the part of al-Nahda that was rare among Islamist parties elsewhere.

The transition in Egypt played out in a dramatically different fashion from the events in Tunisia. When it soon became apparent that deeply entrenched state institutions, emboldened by remnants of the old regime and supported by powerful international actors, intended to retain significant political power and limit the effects of the Egyptian revolution, the political transition quickly became a contentious affair among social forces, led chiefly by the Islamists. In contrast to Tunisia, the transition was not overseen by a civilian government, but by the military leaders who made up the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF).

In an effort to temper the expectations of the revolutionary youth who had led the way to Tahrir Square, SCAF tasked a committee of five constitutional law scholars, led by Tariq al-Bishri, a highly respected intellectual with Islamist leanings, to propose a road map for the transition. Also on the committee was Sobhi Saleh, another highly regarded scholar and member of the Muslim Brotherhood, though without a visible public profile. In appointing these figures, SCAF endeavored to gain the support of the only social force it believed could effectively challenge its control over the process and its eventual outcome. True to form, the Muslim Brotherhood placed its enthusiastic support behind the March 2011 referendum on the nature of the transition. In addition to calling for parliamentary and presidential elections ahead of rewriting the constitution, the document also suspended Egypt's current constitution and placed all legislative and executive powers in the hands of SCAF. This proved to be the first major division within the ranks of the revolutionary forces, as liberals, leftists, and revolutionary youth vehemently opposed the proposed initiative due to their suspicions of the military's intentions and wariness of the Muslim Brotherhood's ability to dominate the impending political processes. For its part, the country's chief Islamist movement perceived this period as a golden opportunity to make significant electoral gains at a time when there was no discernable opposition that was able to match its organisational capacity. In fact, its mobilisation strengths were put on full display during the 19 March referendum, in which the proposals were passed overwhelmingly with 77 percent of the vote. Over 14 million Egyptians supported the initiative, including, to the surprise of many, the newly formed Salafi and jihadi parties, which saw in the referendum an opportunity to flex their own burgeoning political muscle. Fears that Egypt's transition could be

marred by a secular–religious divide—with the military looking on— arose in the aftermath of the referendum.

That divide grew ever deeper over the course of the ensuing months. The revolutionary youth groups and many liberals objected to SCAF’s increasingly authoritarian behaviour, prompting renewed protests throughout the country. In several instances, these were met with a violent response from the security forces and armed thugs, along with waves of mass detentions and military tribunals. Meanwhile, the Muslim Brotherhood frequently attempted to hedge its bets, vocalising its commitment to the aims of the revolution while withdrawing its actual support from events on the ground. Instead, having established the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) as its formal political wing, it focused its energies on its electoral strategy and formulating its plan for governance. Unlike the days in which it stood with millions of Egyptians throughout the country’s public squares, it also sought to avoid any outright confrontation with the state, instead cultivating a tenuous working relationship with SCAF in the hope that it would be granted the right to govern upon winning the elections.

By the time that parliamentary elections were held that fall, it was expected that no political force would be able to compete with the Muslim Brotherhood, which had spent decades preparing for the moment when it could take part in free and fair elections. In an attempt to level the playing field, liberal parties lobbied for a greater share of the seats to be determined by party lists rather than individual contests, which seemed to favour the better organised Islamist groups or the more well-known and better-financed *felool* (remnants of the old regime). In the end, two-thirds of the parliamentary seats were designated for party lists, with one-third going to individual candidate contests. In its response to the new electoral law, the FJP reversed its initial pledge to nominate candidates to only one-third of the seats, increasing that number to 40 percent, and eventually running in an unprecedented 80 percent of available seats.

When the dust settled following three phases of voting in late 2011 and early 2012, the massive mobilisation efforts of the Muslim Brotherhood had clearly paid off. In the historic elections, in which more than 25 million Egyptian voters took part, the FJP received nearly 45 percent of the available seats in the People’s Assembly. Perhaps even more surprising to observers was the fact that the Salafi bloc, politically an unknown quantity, received almost one-quarter of all votes, thereby giving the Islamist parties over 73 percent of the seats and effective control of parliament.

However, events in the period that followed revealed that an “Islamist bloc” was by no means a certainty. Fundamental differences existed in the visions of governance put forward by the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafis, relating mostly to differing views on legislating moral codes for society, and the role

sharia would play in a future constitution. Moreover, the Islamists had seemingly overplayed their hand. SCAF, which was determined to ensure that an Islamist bloc was not allowed to govern unchecked, refused to allow the new members to form a government, instantly transforming the just-elected body into a lame duck parliament. The consequences of this decision were twofold. In the short term it forced the Muslim Brotherhood, ironically, to rejoin the ranks of the revolutionaries and embark on protests against a transition that it had helped create. In the long term, however, the Guidance Bureau reassessed its political calculus, ultimately deciding to field a presidential candidate after a year of pledging that it would not do so. This blatant backpedaling, coupled with popular perceptions of a failed parliamentary experiment and a well-financed media campaign to discredit the organisation, left the Muslim Brotherhood in a drastically weakened position.

The group's leadership also faced challenges from within. Several blocs of youth activists and even high-level officials broke ranks with the Muslim Brotherhood in the months leading up to the parliamentary elections, viewing the strict organisational hierarchy as stifling within the newly opened political environment. Several formed independent political parties with a moderate Islamist agenda. One leading figure, 'Abdel Mon'eim Abul Futuh, was expelled from the organisation in the summer of 2011 due to his decision to run for the presidency at a time when doing so was expressly forbidden. But by the late spring of 2012, he faced the prospect of running against an FJP-nominated candidate in Mohamed Morsi.

The changing landscape of political Islam within post-revolutionary Egypt revealed the structural weaknesses within the Muslim Brotherhood. In the face of a repressive authoritarian system, commanding strict adherence and operating in secrecy were assets. In a free and open political environment, however, these features did not appeal to some followers, and the group's leadership did not adapt its modes of operation at a sufficiently quick pace. On matters of ideology, there was little separating the newly independent Islamists from their former organisation. As Abul Futuh observed, "The Muslim Brotherhood is a school that every Islamic activist should go through. But eventually, one graduates from school."³¹ In other words, while he and others believed in the intellectual roots of the organisation, its guiding philosophy and social mission, they did not necessarily agree with every political calculation or strategic decision it made. At a time when pragmatism was bound to take precedence over principles, the budding political environment paved the way for the emergence of multiple views on the best course to pursue the mission of implementing Islamic principles in governance.

In time, the Muslim Brotherhood would have to contend with the growing diversity within the Islamist movement. At the height of the discontent against

its political strategy, the FJP's candidate still managed to emerge as a finalist in the presidential race. But in order to convince a much larger share of the Egyptian populace to support Morsi's bid, the party would have to win over many of its political rivals, from expelled Muslim Brotherhood members and Salafis intent on charting an independent course to liberals and revolutionary activists. However, despite this seemingly monumental challenge, in the June 2012 second round run-off between Morsi and Ahmed Shafiq, a remnant of the Mubarak era running on a counter-revolutionary platform, the Muslim Brotherhood emerged triumphant with the slimmest of margins, receiving barely 51 percent of the vote.

The democratic election of an Islamist president was a watershed moment in the modern history of the Arab world. It threatened to undermine many long-held assumptions about the nature of political power within these societies. Yet for his part, Morsi initially avoided confrontations with the existing centers of power, instead preferring to allow SCAF to retain its privileged status and to keep most state institutions in the hands of ministers from the previous government. His attempt to reinstate the dissolved parliament was met with a swift rejection from Egypt's highest court, and the Muslim Brotherhood saw its efforts to exert true political power frustrated yet again. In August 2012, as the situation further deteriorated, Morsi made use of a security crisis to dismiss leading military officials, including the head of SCAF and his deputy, from their posts. He proceeded to promote mid-level officials to senior positions, annulled the constitutional statement which served as the basis for SCAF's authority, and retained the powers of the presidency, effectively defusing the crisis and launching a new era in the post-revolutionary transition in Egypt. After emerging out of the early transitional period as the single most powerful political actor, the Muslim Brotherhood now faced the challenge of developing its vision for governance, beginning with the task of writing the country's new constitution, a process that further polarised Egyptian society in advance of its passage in December 2012.

The year that followed saw the achievements of Egypt's democratic transition reversed when the military forcibly removed Morsi from office on his first anniversary as president. In the shadow of the continued lack of security, economic stagnation, and an increasingly polarised political scene, liberal and leftist forces organised a grassroots campaign agitating for Morsi's overthrow, resulting in the 3 July military coup led by Minister of Defense Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. Those who opposed the measure as a betrayal of the revolution and an assault on the legitimacy of the democratic process were met with an unprecedented wave of violent repression. Following six weeks of continuous popular protests and sit-ins, the military unleashed the worst campaign of indiscriminate deadly

force against civilians in Egypt's modern history, resulting in over 1,000 dead and many thousands more injured in August 2013.

In an instant, the Muslim Brotherhood found itself targeted for extermination, as the military's campaign to arrest its leaders, silence its media, destroy its institutions, seize its assets, and isolate its supporters became reminiscent of previous waves of total repression dating back to the Nasser era. As the military, along with the police and the intelligence services, began to reassert their control over Egyptian society, the purported gains of the 2011 uprising appeared to be very much in doubt.

Though less extreme in the drastic reversal of fortunes, Yemen's transition came under intense pressures from the previous regime and external forces vying for influence in the country. Following Saleh's departure after a stalemate that lasted for several months, the first major step in the transition was the election of Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi, Saleh's vice-president, to succeed the ousted leader. Hadi ran unopposed, and the election was in fact a national referendum on the transitional process itself. Thus the process received overwhelming support from virtually all political factions in Yemen, including the leading Islamist party. Karman toned down her revolutionary rhetoric and endorsed Hadi's two-year interim presidency, "during which we will build Yemen," she said.³²

Islah Party leaders expected to be included in a future government that incorporated the opposition. The party sought a period of transitional justice, coupled with a cleansing from state institutions of Saleh loyalists, to be followed by the process of writing the state constitution to guarantee political freedoms and democratic governance. This process stalled during the first year of Hadi's term in office. He faced frequent opposition to his attempts at removing powerful military figures from their positions and he rarely included oppositional leaders in his administration, some of whom took to resuming their public protests. In the meantime, Islah Party head Mohammad al-Yadomi continued to express his support for the transitional process, hopeful that by standing along-side Hadi and his powerful regional allies, the Islamists would eventually help shape the future Yemeni state.

In Libya, a country with no recent legacy of democratic elections or popular participation in government, the transition from the Qaddafi era would not be straightforward. Indeed, the process would be further complicated due to the country's competing ideological traditions and the looming presence of international forces, with pressures to achieve a pluralistic political system in a short period of time being exceedingly high. When the Transitional National Council (TNC), the body entrusted with overseeing the process of elections and writing the constitution, met at a victory celebration in October 2011, its leader Mustafa 'Abdel-Jalil announced the dawn of a new Libyan state based on Islamic

principles. Though not an avowed Islamist, ‘Abdel-Jalil tapped into the perceived religious conservatism of Libyan society, declaring: “We are an Islamic country. We take the Islamic religion as the core of our new government. The constitution will be based on our Islamic religion.”³³

In the ensuing months, the now familiar divide between secular and religious forces appeared to have become fully realised. The interim prime minister of the TNC, Mahmoud Jibril, was openly critical of what he perceived as attempts by Islamists to hijack the revolution and manipulate its outcome in their favor. For their part, the newly founded Islamist political parties argued that they were adhering to the tenets of democracy. The Muslim Brotherhood, which had maintained a limited presence in Libya under Qaddafi, established the Justice and Construction Party (JCP) headed by Mohammad Sawan ahead of the elections in July 2012. The Nation Party, led by Ali Sallabi and also featuring Belhadj as a strong leader, offered an alternative Islamist vision free of the institutional constraints of the Muslim Brotherhood.

When the votes were counted, the Islamists had received a smaller share of seats in Libya than they had in neighbouring countries, which appeared to stem the tide of Islamist gains in the post-revolutionary transitions across the Arab world.³⁴ While Jibril’s coalition took twice as many seats as the JCP, it became readily apparent that this election was not a clear-cut defeat for the Islamists. Jibril faced internal pressures from former Muslim Brotherhood figures within his own coalition bloc, and went as far as to reassure voters of his Islamist credentials, declaring his support for sharia as the main source of legislation. Furthermore, the choice of Mohamed al-Magariief to serve as president of the General National Congress, the interim body tasked with governing Libya until the end of the transition period, was a nod to the Islamists. Though not a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, Magariief was widely viewed as identifying with its political views. His emergence as a consensus candidate to lead Libya’s transition points to the fact that the country was not faced with the same deep ideological divisions that characterised other states. Even in the absence of a clear electoral victory, Islamist politics was poised to play a key role in the new Libya.

Post-Islamism Redux

Prior to the wave of revolts that took the Arab world by storm in 2011, the prospect of an avowedly Islamist social movement reaching the height of political power in any state in the region appeared to be exceedingly dim. Some scholars had previously described the advent of “post-Islamism” as the defining characteristic of Arab societies in the authoritarian setting of the early twenty-

first century. Others subsequently appropriated the term for a variety of purposes, from depicting the bankruptcy of militant groups to tracking the shift in political platforms and electoral strategies by popular social movements in a desperate attempt to remain a viable actor in an increasingly restrictive political context.

Even as the trajectory of Islamist movements in positions of authority skyrocketed in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings, seemingly rendering “post-Islamism” a premature fantasy, the term may yet have its uses. For Islamism, by its very definition, was a theoretical construct depicting the rise of a particular social movement functioning in tension with the existing order: the post-colonial, secular, nation state system that arose in the Middle East. But just as the supposed failure of that project is supposed to have yielded a post-Islamist world, so too will its potential success. As the aftermath of the Arab revolts has attempted to redefine the state on another basis, one that incorporates the spirit, if not the letter, of the Islamist mission, that mission’s need to persist as a discernable social phenomenon will gradually decline, until it ceases to exist altogether. In that regard, Islamism is no different from all social movements that arise out of a particular historical moment only to recede once its aims have been achieved.

The experience of Turkey’s Justice and Development Party (AKP) sheds some light on this possibility. After overcoming the considerable obstacles placed before it by virtue of its leadership’s Islamist credentials, the AKP rose to become the leading political actor in Turkey in the first decade of the twenty-first century. By most accounts, during its time in power, the party reformed the country’s political institutions, presided over consistent economic growth, and greatly enhanced Turkey’s regional and international standing. However, in keeping with Turkey’s strict constitutional ban on religious political parties, the AKP built its successful record without an explicitly Islamist platform.

Given the pressures faced by Islamist movements in the post-authoritarian setting of many Arab countries, it is no wonder that the “Turkish model” gained currency among the region’s newly formed political parties, almost none of which feature Islam in their name. This approach promotes the notion that, insofar as Islamist movements existed on the margins of a political process that disavowed any religious influence, they were far more likely to frame their mission in religious terms, especially insofar as they claimed to represent a pious society against an impious ruler. With the political scene having been opened to the legitimate participation of Islamist groups, however, as they continue to represent the religious sensibilities of their fellow citizens, the need to define their mission in Islamic terms has since receded.

This transition has only just begun, but it can already be seen playing out in a number of challenges facing Islamist groups as they seek to redefine the nature of their systems of governance. On the issue of implementing the sharia, itself a

fluid and adaptable legal system that does not easily lend itself to codification, a renewed emphasis on the *maqasid*, or objectives of the law, has begun to replace the long-standing fixation on applying the historical letter of the law. In Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and elsewhere, this has meant that, in some ways, the political platforms of mainstream Islamist parties have become so generalised in some areas, whether on matters of the economy or foreign policy, as to become virtually indistinguishable from those of non-Islamist parties.

Moreover, a key lesson from the Turkish experience is that a political party will ultimately be judged by its performance once in power, not by its founding principles or guiding philosophy. While the move toward pragmatism accompanied the Muslim Brotherhood's foray into politics, this realisation puts that transformation into a clearer perspective: its political leaders will be held accountable on the basis not of their personal religious devotion, but of their ability to conduct their public service faithfully and effectively. In Egypt, Morsi's government learned this lesson the hard way, and his subsequent expulsion from the presidency and the Muslim Brotherhood's renewed subjection to regime repression present a compelling challenge for the future of its political activism. In the hopes of avoiding a similar political crisis, Tunisia's Islamist movement withdrew from the leadership of the transition and ensured that it would still be a part of the political process even if it could no longer dictate its terms.

Islamist movements still face numerous challenges and contradictions that will only be addressed during the course of their experience in government. On the issue of citizenship rights, movement leaders have repeatedly expressed their support for national identity as the basis of a "civil state," but in practice it remains to be seen how legislating according to Islamic principles would avoid adversely affecting minority rights. In terms of economic policy and social justice, the platforms put forward in the early stages of political contestation by Islamist parties lacked any imagination. They tended to vacillate between vague allusions to Islamic directives to tend to the needs of the most vulnerable segments of society and staunch commitments to the continuation of neo-liberal policies that were at the root of many of the socio-economic ills characteristic of the authoritarian era. Similarly, in the arena of foreign relations, platitudes about pan-Arab and pan-Islamic solidarity, such as the continued verbal commitment to the Palestinian struggle, were often outweighed by more narrow national interests that precluded actual policy changes. Pressures from global and regional powers such as the United States and Saudi Arabia offered new considerations to Islamist parties unaccustomed to dealing with uncomfortable geopolitical realities.

Despite the arduous trials that await Islamist movements as they attempt to negotiate their place in the nascent political order, the most prudent decision that these parties have made (whether freely or under pressure) is to avoid going it

alone. In nearly every case, the Islamist movement exists within a broad national effort to determine the future structure of a state. In Libya and Yemen, Islamists are a junior partner in this endeavor, attempting to frame their participation within the context of the national interest rather than a narrow appeal to religious conviction. Before stepping down from the leadership role in Tunisia, al-Nahda was the senior partner working with other political forces to chart a path designed to ensure that individual rights are respected and that the state does not become an agent for legislating and enforcing piety. Even in the Egyptian case, the notable exception due to the Muslim Brotherhood's desire to dominate all aspects of the transition, the Morsi presidency began with promises of pragmatism and inclusion before finding itself in total isolation months later. Morsi drew his prime minister from the previous government and left several powerful ministries, including defense, foreign affairs, and finance, in the hands of officials unaffiliated with the Islamist movement. Instead, the FJP opted to develop its political credentials slowly, taking on several social services ministries such as housing, education, youth, and labor, in an effort to establish a track record of effective governance before tackling the larger challenges facing Egypt.

Internally, the Islamist movement faces its own challenges in attempting to temper its traditional ideology to the changing political realities, while also adapting its organisational structure to meet the needs of a democratic society. In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood experienced a significant number of defections because of its inability to respond adequately to the concerns of its vast following. The rise of Salafi groups in Libya and Tunisia, as well as Egypt, added yet another major player to the emerging landscape of post-revolutionary Islamist politics, forcing a recalculation of each group's religious credentials, or the questioning of whether such a metric will ultimately matter in the struggle for popular support for political power. In addition, the shift in resources toward the political sphere has adversely affected the social mission of Islamist groups in the period since the Arab uprisings began. While this may permanently transform the nature of Islamist organisations like the Muslim Brotherhood, it is likely to be viewed by its leadership as a positive step toward the realisation of Banna's original vision which deems the ideal government to be the mirror image of a sufficiently Islamised society. In that scenario, the evolution of Islamist activism renders it practically undetectable within a state governed by its virtues.

Notes

- * *Abdullah al-Arian* is an associate professor of History at Georgetown University in Qatar. He received his doctorate in History from Georgetown University,

where he wrote his dissertation on the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt during the decade of the 1970s. He received his Master's degree in Sociology of Religion from the London School of Economics and his BA in Political Science from Duke University. He is editor of the "Critical Currents in Islam" page on the *Jadaliyya e-zine*. He is also a frequent contributor to the *Al-Jazeera* English network and website. His first book, entitled *Answering the Call: Popular Islamic Activism in Sadat's Egypt* was published by Oxford University Press in 2014. Professor Al-Arian teaches introductory courses on the history of the Middle East, as well as advanced topics courses covering the history of modern Egypt, Islamic social movements, and the history of US policy towards the Middle East.

1. Robert F. Worth and Mona El-Naggar, "Fraud Charges Mar Egypt Vote," *New York Times*, 28 Nov. 2010.
2. Robert F. Worth and Mona El-Naggar, "First Round of Voting Ousts Islamists from Egypt's Parliament," *New York Times*, 30 Nov. 2010.
3. Olivier Roy, "Islam: The Democracy Dilemma," in Robin Wright (ed.), *The Islamists Are Coming: Who They Really Are* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2012), 13–20.
4. Abdelwahab El-Affendi, *Turabi's Revolution: Islam and Power in Sudan* (London: Grey Seal, 1991), 1.
5. Richard Mitchell, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), 6.
6. Rachid al-Ghannouchi, "Secularism and the Relation between Religion and the State from the Perspective of al-Nahdha Party," Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy, Washington, DC, 2 Mar. 2012.
7. Raymond William Baker, *Islam Without Fear: Egypt and the New Islamists* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 20–2.
8. Asef Bayat, *Making Islam Democratic: Social Movements and the Post-Islamist Turn* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 11.
9. Anthony Shadid, "Egypt's Path After Uprising Does Not Have to Follow Iran's," *New York Times*, 12 Feb. 2011.
10. Interview with Islam Lotfi.
11. Interview with 'Abd al-Mon'eim Abul Futuh.
12. "Tunisia: The Advent of Liberal Islamism—An Interview with Rashid Al-Ghannouchi," http://religion.info/english/interviews/article_516.shtml (last accessed 28 Aug. 2012).
13. Omar Ashour, *Libyan Islamists Unpacked: Rise, Transformation, and Future* (Doha: Brookings Doha Center, 2012), 3.
14. Ernesto Londono and Leila Fadel, "Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood Faces Prospect of Democracy Amid Internal Discord," *Washington Post*, 21 Feb., 2011.
15. Interview with 'Usama Yasin, "Shahed 'Ala al-Thawra," *Al Jazeera*, 11 June 2011.
16. Interview with 'Usama Yasin, "Shahed 'Ala al-Thawra," *Al Jazeera*, 20 Nov. 2011.
17. Yasmine Fathi, "Egypt's Battle of the Camel: The Day the Tide Turned," *Al-Ahram English*, 2 Feb. 2012.

18. Laurent Bonnefoy, "Yemen's Islamists and the Revolution," *Foreign Policy*, 9 Feb 2012.
19. Kareem Fahim, "Yemen's Opposition May Be Caught by its Own Double Game," *New York Times*, 2 Dec 2011.
20. Nir Rosen, "Islamism and the Syrian Uprising," *Foreign Policy*, 8 Mar. 2012.
21. "Tunisia: The Advent of Liberal Islamism—An Interview with Rashid Al-Ghannouchi," http://religion.info/english/interviews/article_516.shtml (last accessed 28 Aug. 2012).
22. 'Esam al-'Erian, "What the Muslim Brothers Want," *New York Times*, 9 Feb. 2011.
23. Sherif Tarek, "Q&A: Emad El-Din Abdel Ghafour, Chairman of the Salafist Al-Nour Party," http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/3497/qanda_emad-el-din-abdel-ghafour-chairman-of-the-sa, 12 Dec. 2011 (last accessed 28 Aug. 2012).
24. Neil MacFarquhar, "Religious Radicals' Turn to Democracy Alarms Egypt," *New York Times*, 1 Apr. 2011.
25. Hadeel al-Shalchi and Maggie Michael, "Abdel Hakim Belhaj, Libya Rebel Commander, Plays Down Islamist Past," *Associated Press*, 2 Sep. 2011.
26. "Democracy, Islam, and the 'New Yemen,'" al-Hayat interview with Mohammad Qahtan, republished in al-Monitor, 2 Feb. 2012, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/politics/2012/02/mohammad-qahtan-member-of-the-hi.html> (last accessed 28 Aug. 2012).
27. Nadia al-Sakkaf, "There is No Turning Back: Interview with Tawakkul Karman," *The Daily Beast*, 9 Oct. 2011, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2011/10/09/tawakul-karman-interview-nobel-peace-prize-could-help-arab-spring.html> (last accessed 28 Aug. 2012).
28. Hazim al-Amine, "Leader of Syrian Muslim Brotherhood Discloses Secret Offer from Iran," al-Hayat interview with Farouk Tayfour, republished in al-Monitor, 20 Jan. 2012, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/politics/2012/01/tayfour-to-al-hayat-iran-offered.html> (last accessed 28 Aug. 2012).
29. Ali al-Bayanouni, "Assad's Myth Needs Busting," *The Guardian*, 3 Aug. 2011.
30. "Tunisia: The Advent of Liberal Islamism—An Interview with Rashid Al-Ghannouchi," http://religion.info/english/interviews/article_516.shtml (last accessed 28 Aug. 2012).
31. Interview with 'Abdel Mon'eim Abul Futuh.
32. "Nobel Laureate Lays Out Plans to Build Modern State," *Gulf News*, 20 Feb. 2012.
33. Adam Nossiter and Kareem Fahim, "Revolution Won, Top Libyan Official Vows a New and More Pious State," *New York Times*, 23 Oct. 2011.
34. David D. Kirkpatrick, "Election Results in Libya Break an Islamist Wave," *New York Times*, 8 July 2012.