At the conclusion of the meeting we had in Rome on April 20-21, participants agreed to exchange views concerning what the discussion revealed about areas of agreement and disagreement between Islamists and people working in the liberal democratic tradition.

The following statements represent the conclusions reached by Amr Hamzawy, Marina Ottaway, Nathan Brown and Paul Salem.

Major areas of agreement

In our view, the discussion revealed three issues where the position of Islamist participants and the rules and requirements of democracy as interpreted in the liberal tradition coincide:

1) Respect for all rules that regulate political competition and acceptance of the outcome of the political process, as long as rules were respected. The Islamist parties and movements represented at the meeting have expressed commitment to the rules of political competition, even when the rules limit their participation. Islamists that have chosen to participate in the legal political process of their countries have been responsible actors, abiding by the rules and respecting the results.

2) Acceptance of other political forces, that is, acceptance of pluralism in the political arena. Parties and movements that are better integrated in the legal political process not only accept the legitimacy of other political forces, but are building alliances with and searching for partners among non-Islamist forces. For example, this is the case in Yemen and Morocco now, and it has been the case for the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood at times).

3) The necessity for political parties to address specific public policy issues, rather than just broad ideological ones. This focus on public policy is particularly pronounced in the case of parties and movements that face fewer restrictions to political participation and that are treated like all other political actors. Ideological differences among parties are important, of course, but in the end a party that wants to participate in government must deal with concrete policy issues, many of which require technical knowledge rather than simply adherence to values and principles. The discussion revealed a rising interest in how to design public policies and steer them toward adoption and implementation. The Party for Justice and Development in Morocco and the Islamic Constitutional Movement in Kuwait represent the clearest examples in this regard.
Areas where the degree of agreement or disagreement remains unclear to us

We noticed during the discussion two broad issues where Islamist parties have not yet clarified their positions—or, where they have been clear, but betray some very different orientations. As a result, we find that we cannot reach conclusions about whether there is at least partial convergence between Islamist and liberal democratic views, or whether there is profound disagreement. The two issues are acceptance of social—rather than political—pluralism; and acceptance of the necessity for political parties to spell out clearly the principles they consider to be inviolable and the mechanisms for adjudicating whether the principles have been violated.

Social and Cultural Pluralism - As we stated above, we believe the position of Islamist parties on political pluralism is clear and credible. Concerning social pluralism, however, we are not sure that the issue has been resolved within the Islamist movements. If it has, this has not been communicated effectively to others. But just as often, we detect some divergence within movements and between them on the vital question: To what extent would Islamist movements, if in power, allow non-Muslims, or Muslims that do not belong to the mainstream in a particular country, live by their own rules and values? The main tension with regard to social pluralism is not so much over matters of morality. Instead, it is over the role of state authority in mandating specific conduct. To what extent should social life be regulated by the government and public institutions (according to an Islamist model if Islamists were in positions of power)? To what extent should central authorities limit themselves to the administration of public affairs, recognizing that there are social and cultural issues that should be considered private and where the government should not interfere, thus allowing social and cultural diversity? We acknowledge that Islamist movements are not the only political actors that remain uncertain on how to address this issue. In many Arab countries, official religious establishments and existing regimes are equally ambiguous on the issue of social pluralism and tensions on such issues even flare up occasionally in political systems where individual rights are considered paramount.

The compatibility of the Islamist approach and the liberal democratic approach to social and cultural pluralism will depend on how two questions are answered:

1. Will Islamists use their presence in the government to impose their values on the entire society through legislation? For example, the PJD has stated that if municipal councils decide democratically, they have the right to ban the sale of alcohol. In the liberal democratic tradition, decisions that impose the beliefs of one group on everybody represent the “tyranny of the majority” that protection of individual rights and of minority rights is supposed to curb. But there is also evidence in some movements of a willingness to distinguish between those practices it sees as required and those it endorses but seeks to encourage only through persuasion.

2. Will Islamists recognize the right of minority groups and of individuals to live by their own norms and values, as long as they do not hurt others by doing so? This is a crucial issue, because different groups consider quite legitimate some social practices that other groups reject. Where would the lines be drawn? Can Islamists reconcile the
rights of each group to live by its rules (this is what acceptance of the other means) with each group’s desire to avoid what they find offensive?

*Need to spell out clearly the fundamental values on which the political system is based and the process for adjudicating violations* - Islamists believe that the laws of a country must adhere to the principles of Islam represented by the Sharia, but not all are prepared to spell out clearly, for Arab citizens and the rest of the world to know without a doubt, what those principles are. Nor are all Islamist parties willing to state clearly who has the right to decide whether a particular law violates Islamic principles or not. During the discussion we heard considerable differences among Islamist movements in this respect. We believe that the stance of the PJD and the Muslim Brotherhood accepted the need to spell out clearly both the principles and the means of adjudication, while other movements remained very broad and ambiguous on this issue. And indeed, we surmise that some movements have been kept at such a distance from the political process that they have not been called upon to decide where they stand. But as Islamist political parties increasingly present themselves as offering a viable political alternative, they will be pressed to answer more fully how their general ideas about Islam and the Sharia will translate into political practice.

**Areas where there is clear conceptual divergence between the thinking of Islamists and that of liberal democrats, but where the implications for mutual acceptance are not clear**

The discussion in Rome brought into the open for us one fundamental difference between the Islamist and liberal approaches to political systems: for Islamist movements, the concept of “justice” is central. For people working in the democratic tradition—and we put ourselves in that camp—the central concept is “rights,” and above all individual rights. (European countries, with a long history of minorities, also accept a concept of group rights, which is not accepted in the American political tradition).

While the difference is very clear, the implications are not. Is there an inherent conflict between a view of the world that emphasizes justice over one that emphasizes rights? Is this a difference with which all sides can live?

Systems based on individual rights leave a lot to be desired on certain aspects of social justice, but they do not need to. For example, social justice is high in the agenda of European welfare states, particularly the Scandinavian countries, although individual rights are also strongly protected. The United States system emphasized individual opportunities but not justice. As a result, the country offers both the best individual opportunities found anywhere in the world and a level of poverty that is very high given the country’s wealth.

On the other hand, political systems that have emphasized justice and played down individual rights—from the Soviet system to the Massachusetts colony of the American founding fathers—have historically been illiberal and repressive. We are not stating that
it is unconceivable to have a political system that emphasizes justice without becoming repressive. We are simply recalling the historical record. How do Islamist movements combine the emphasis on justice with respect for individual rights and freedoms? When does one get subordinated to the other?

As a result of these observations, we believe that it would be useful to continue the discussion on three points, which we list in the order of our perception of their importance:

1) social and cultural pluralism
2) implications of the different stress on “justice” and “rights”
3) public policy priorities of Islamist movements