



What Islamists Need to be Clear About The Case of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood

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Since the publication of their paper entitled *Islamist Movements and the Democratic Process in the Arab World: Exploring the Gray Zones* (Carnegie Paper 67), the authors have had continued communication with officials and members of Islamist movements and parties that have chosen to participate in the legal political process of their countries—the movements discussed in the paper. Some of the writers expressed disagreement with our analysis and even irritation that we were defining as “gray zones” issues on which their stance had been amply clarified. Such communications implied that the problem was not the Islamists’ failure to be clear but our inability to understand. Other writers, however, drew a different conclusion from our paper, namely that there remains a fundamental problem of communication between Islamist movements and Western based analysts and, most importantly, governments. Expressing a great deal of frustration, several writers asked us, in essence: “What do Islamist movements have to do in order to gain credibility in the West, so that their commitment to the democratic process will not be constantly called into question?”

The second question has also been posed to us in the form of queries on how Islamist parties could describe their positions in a manner that would resolve continuing doubts. While we value our participation in quiet dialogues, as researchers of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, we need to make our work available to the broader public. And the question of why Western analysts and governments are so suspicious of Islamist movements is certainly worth addressing. The mutual suspicion between Islamist movements and the West does not help further the cause of political reform in Arab countries. Islamist organizations have emerged as pivotal actors in any process of political transformation in the region. Western actors—both governments and civil society actors—are also influential and likely to remain so. It is important that the two sides at least understand each other and reach some clarity about what they can agree on, where they will continue to

disagree, and whether they can learn to live with their differences and develop a constructive relationship. We have thus decided to give a public answer to the question, focusing not on prescribing what Islamist parties should do, but on explaining why we think they have not gained credibility in the West as legitimate political actors.

In the work we have done at the Carnegie Endowment in the last few years, we have tried to understand and explain to Western policy makers and analysts how the position of Islamist movements that have chosen to participate in the legal political processes of their countries has evolved and continues to evolve. In this short article we are seeking to explain to Islamist movements the reasons for the lingering suspicions about Islamist movements in the West. We will not address all reasons for suspicion—we will ignore arguments based on ignorance and preconceived notions of Islam and Islamist movements, because there is not much to explain there. We will, however, seek to address what we consider to be valid concerns. We divide our answer into two parts. The first part is written from our point of view as analysts working in the framework of liberal democratic political principles and political systems, and seeks to explain why we still feel there are unanswered questions in the position of most Islamist movements on issues of fundamental importance in a democracy, for example, the issue of universal citizenship. The second part of this article addresses additional concerns about Islamist movements raised by the United States and other Western governments.

We believe that this attempt to explain Western views of a problem to an audience in the Middle East typifies the Carnegie Endowment's New Vision of what a twenty-first century think tank should do, namely not only provide U.S. policy makers and analysts with information and insights about other regions of the world, but also provide policy makers and analysts in other parts of the world with a better understanding of the United States and the West.

Fear of the Unknown

Before addressing the specific reasons why there is such lingering suspicion of Islamist movements in the West, it is important to remember that such suspicion has surrounded historically the appearance of all political parties and movements with beliefs rooted in religion. The response to Islamist parties is far from unique. When the first Christian Democratic organizations, mostly Catholic in their orientation, were formed in the late nineteenth century, they were seen by many as dangerous organizations seeking to overthrow established political systems in order to open the way for the domination of the Catholic Church. Like Islamists today, Christian Democratic parties were accused of seeking to use democratic political processes to come to power but then rejecting them once they were in power.

Fears of Christian Democratic parties have long since abated in the West as a result of experience. Christian Democratic parties have participated in the political process in many countries for decades, have won elections in some, and they have always continued to respect the democratic process, holding regular elections and stepping down when defeated.

Indeed, Islamist parties sometimes point to the integration of Christian Democrats as evidence that a party with a religious affiliation can be a legitimate democratic actor. But the analogy is untested: Islamist parties have so far a limited track record as participants in the democratic process. In fact, they have no track record at all in gaining power democratically except in Turkey and Palestine, where the experience is still recent. Elsewhere, Islamists that are or have recently been in power—the Iranian regime, the Sudanese government, or the Taliban—did not come to power democratically and of course did not rule democratically.

In other countries, some Islamist groups that competed in democratic elections (such as the Algerian Party for a Society of Peace and the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood) have occasionally participated as junior partners in cabinets. Morocco's PJD might even lead a governing coalition after the upcoming legislative elections. Nevertheless, Islamists' participation in politics has usually been confined to the opposition ranks. Indeed, the prime objective of most Islamist movements across the Arab world has not been to govern directly (at least in the short term) but to establish and protect political presence through participation in elections and representation in legislative bodies.

In spite of the limited track record of Islamists as political actors, there is some evidence that they have respected the rules governing their participation in legal politics. Even in the cases where these rules are highly restrictive and unfair, such as in Egypt and Algeria, Islamist parties have chosen to adhere to them. Furthermore, Islamists have taken participation in legislative bodies seriously, more so in fact than ruling establishments and secular opposition parties. Be it in national parliaments or in municipal councils, Islamist movements—even those not legally recognized as political parties such as Egypt's and Kuwait's—have been disciplined actors that use all available instruments to influence the outcome of the legislative process.

Nevertheless, the record of Islamist movements in democratic politics must be considered inconclusive, because examples are few and because they are too recent to allow firm conclusions. This is not an indictment of Islamist parties, but a de facto situation that all new political organizations have to face.

Ambiguities in the Position of Islamist Movements

Adding to the doubts that inevitably surround movements with a scant track record in democratic politics is the much more profound difficulty that even open-minded analysts encounter in trying to understand the positions of Islamist movements on a number of crucial issues. In *Islamist Movements and the Democratic Process in the Arab World: Exploring the Gray Zones*, we outlined six ambiguities, each linked to a thematic area in the Islamists' universe: application of the Sharia; violence; political pluralism; individual freedoms; minorities; and women's rights.

We received many replies from Islamists seeking to refute the idea that there are ambiguities in their positions. We would like to explain here both why we believe the position of Islamist parties on these issues is ambiguous, and why it is important that it be clarified. The goal of seeking clarification is not to reach an identity of views. Rather, it is to understand whether the positions of Islamist organizations are truly compatible with values that are central to the Western liberal tradition and to our understanding of what democracy means. We will focus our analysis here on one Islamist movement, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, in order to be more specific in the discussion than we were in the broader original paper. We do not believe the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood to be an especially ambiguous movement, and in fact some of the issues on which we will focus are common to other Islamist movements. But since each movement has its own ambiguities, we believe that the specific focus will help sharpen the analysis.

The Case of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood

In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood has shown an increased interest in participation in the political process since 2003. While the movement had been intermittently active in electoral politics in the past, its recent participation has been more substantial and far more successful, the result of a considerable organizational and planning effort. In 2005, the Muslim Brotherhood won almost 20 percent of the seats of the People's Assembly (lower, directly elected chamber of the Egyptian parliament), becoming the strongest opposition movement challenging Mubarak's semiauthoritarian regime. Overcoming the obstacles created by a highly restrictive domestic political scene and its status as a banned organization since 1954, the Brotherhood has fashioned in recent years a political platform prioritizing participation as an opposition movement in legislative bodies. The movement has called on the regime to move Egyptian politics beyond the limited pluralism persistent since the 1970s by introducing democratic reforms. The Brotherhood has downplayed, if not abandoned, the goals of establishing an Islamic state of sorts or assuming power and implementing revolutionary changes in Egyptian society and politics.

Notwithstanding the Brotherhood's democratic rhetoric and actions, its growing participation since 2003 has provoked the suspicions of the regime as well as secular (liberal and leftist) opposition parties. The regime's skepticism is not surprising: the Brotherhood represents a challenge to its authority and there is a long history of rivalry, mistrust, and controlled confrontation between the organization and the government dating back at least to 1954. But the skepticism prevailing among secular politicians and intellectuals cannot be so easily explained without reference to the ambiguities in the Brotherhood's positions and the central questions that the movement has so far left unanswered.

The salience of these unanswered questions is growing. Over the last few months, the regime has used various incidents to spark doubts among the Egyptian populace with regard to the Brotherhood's commitment to peaceful action and the ultimate objectives of its political participation. Three of these incidents are worth mentioning: a declaration of the Supreme Guide Muhammad Mahdi Akif during the Lebanon War 2006 that the Brotherhood was willing to dispatch 10,000 fighters to Lebanon to help Hizbollah; a demonstration in December 2006 by a contingent of Muslim Brotherhood students at Al Azhar University wearing black face masks; and a series of ambiguous statements by leading figures in the movement with regard to the status of Egyptian Christians and their political rights. In all three cases the regime was able to stage an effective media campaign to reawaken doubts about the "true" motives for the Brotherhood's political participation: has the organization really abandoned the militarized legacy of the 1940s and 1950s? Is it really willing to accept equal citizenship rights for Muslims and Christians? Indeed, in recent months, the regime has developed an entire discourse on "citizenship" based on an implicit (and occasionally explicit) challenge to the Brotherhood's legacy. Whether these doubts are justified or not, they have resonated with the public as a result of the Muslim Brotherhood's inability to clarify the ambiguities of its position.

A few weeks ago, the confrontation escalated when the regime made clear its intentions to change the system for electing parliament from the current single member constituency-based winner-takes-all system to one of proportional representation in multi-member districts. The new system would favor parties capable of presenting a list for each district, making it virtually impossible for independent candidates to compete successfully. Since the Muslim Brotherhood is not a party and all its MPs were elected as independents, the change would be a serious blow to its presence in parliament. The movement reacted by declaring its determination to develop a platform for a political party. Planning for a party—even one likely to be refused official recognition—necessitates drawing up a party platform and thus requires (or at least allows) the Brotherhood to address the unanswered questions.

The Muslim Brotherhood's Unanswered Questions

Sharia

To start easing suspicions, the Brotherhood will have to clarify its stance on the Islamic Sharia. Of course, the Brotherhood cannot repudiate the Sharia any more than a Christian Democratic party can repudiate its Christian roots. But the Brotherhood could put to rest many fears by being clearer about the principles of Sharia it considers central and about the process it proposes for ensuring that laws do not violate such principles. In constitutional democracies, the legitimacy of laws is ensured by three factors: clearly spelled out democratic procedures for the adoption of laws; conformity with a set of higher principles set out in the constitution; and the existence of established institutions (such as constitutional courts) that can rule whether a specific law conforms to the principles outlined in the constitution. The position of the Brotherhood on its respect for democratic legislative procedures is clear, and does not require, in our opinion, any further elucidation: Brotherhood members elected to parliament have proven over the years to be respectful of democratic procedures, often more so than the incumbent government. But the position of the Brotherhood remains unclear on the inviolable higher principles and the process for deciding whether a law violates those principles. References to Sharia cannot satisfy the need for clarity concerning fundamental principles, because the Sharia is not a code, a simple written document that everybody can consult. It is a body of rules and interpretations developed over a period of thirteen centuries by different schools of jurisprudence. Furthermore, it is not clear which institution has the power to decide whether laws conform to the Sharia. Unless these issues are clarified, suspicion is bound to remain high.

In recent years, Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, like many other Islamist movements, has undergone a subtle shift of terminology. No longer does it stress "implementation of the Sharia"; instead it calls itself "a civil movement with an Islamic reference (*marja`iyya*)" in order to suggest that it accepts the civil nature of the political system and that it will draw on Islamic teachings for its positions—but that it will pursue its goals by working through rather than around constitutional and democratic procedures. Further, some movement leaders speak of the "goals (*maqasid*)" of the Sharia, implying that Islamic law will provide general (and quite flexible) guidance to its legislators rather than a set of narrow dictates. These general shifts in terminology send a message of flexibility, but leave many questions unanswered. How would the Brotherhood determine when laws are in keeping with the general goals of the Sharia? Would the task be assigned to existing constitutional authorities in the legislature, the executive, and the judiciary? Or would formal or informal authority be granted to Islamic scholars? If a law is adopted through democratic procedures that the Brotherhood feels violates the Islamic Sharia, will the movement restrict itself to the arts of democratic persuasion to change the result? Can the Brotherhood distinguish between its own preferences

(interpretations to be followed by those who follow movement teachings and positions) and those matters that are to be imposed by the authority of the state (for instance, with women's dress)? If the movement cannot answer these questions definitively, it will not only scare off allies, they will also run afoul of the ban on religious parties contained in the Egyptian party law and will soon be entrenched in the constitution.

Dual Political and Religious Identity

There are other issues that raise some doubts about the Brotherhood's commitment to democracy. In contrast to most Islamist movements across the Arab world, the Brotherhood has kept its dual identity—religious movement and political actor—under a single organizational umbrella. We recognize that this may not be entirely by choice: the Mubarak regime refuses to allow any Islamist party to register. But for a long time the Muslim Brothers were even unwilling to clarify whether they believed it desirable to establish a political party, and, if so, how much autonomy such party should be granted.

From our point of view, lack of separation is troubling. Religious movements, by definition, deal with absolutes: issues of good and evil, of right and wrong, of faith. They have the right to demand conformity and discipline from their members, as long as membership is voluntary. Political parties, however, make decisions, or at least participate in decisions, that affect all citizens. Thus, they must respect basic principles shared by all—this is why democratic countries have a constitution. They also need to be tolerant of dissent, willing to accept compromise, and above all willing to accept that they need to follow the laws of the country, even if they do not approve of them, and that they can only change them by following the established process. In this regard, it is not only important that the party and the broader organization have separate identities but also full (and not merely formal) autonomy. Returning to the earlier example, Christian Democratic parties became accepted as legitimate political players when it became clear the party leadership made its decisions on its own without accepting instructions from the Church.

Organization and Leadership

Related to the separation of religious movement and political party is the issue of the organizational and leadership structure of the Muslim Brotherhood. The Brotherhood has systematically left questions pertaining to its organizational structure unanswered. Undoubtedly, the status of the Brotherhood as a banned organization frequently faced with regime repression has imposed a high degree of secrecy in planning and managing political action. Yet a secretive structure provokes suspicions, and the movement has not undertaken any serious attempts to explain the internal hierarchy of authority and decision making procedures of the movement. The public image of the Brotherhood has remained that of an undemocratically organized movement over which an authoritarian Guidance Bureau presides and dictates decisions in all matters. Such structure may be acceptable for a religious movement—in fact, it is up to

that movement's members to decide whether this is what they want. But a political party that influences public life is a different matter. A secretive and seemingly authoritarian internal leadership structure casts doubts on the Brotherhood's commitment to democratic ideals.

Universal Citizenship

In the intertwined areas of citizenship and status of Copts (Egyptian Christians), the Muslim Brotherhood's position raises additional doubts. In the liberal democratic tradition, democracy implies "universal citizenship," that is, equality of rights of all citizens regardless of gender, religion, or race. All citizens have the right to practice their beliefs within the limits established by the country's constitution and laws. There are reasons to question the Muslim Brothers' commitment to the principle of universal citizenship because of the stream of either ambivalent or outright discriminatory public statements by leading figures. Although disciplined and united in its statements on most political issues, the Brotherhood has been speaking in contradictory voices on the citizenship and status of Christians. Some have endorsed in public equal rights for Muslims and Christians based on the principle of universal citizenship as well as on respect for the binding non-religious identity of the Egyptian state. For example, Abdul Munim Abul-Futuh, a leading member of the Guidance Bureau, stated several times in 2005 and 2006 that Muslims and Copts are "partners in the Egyptian nation" with equal rights and duties. But others have called openly for discriminating against Copts in public life—First Deputy to the Supreme Guide Muhammad Habib stated in 2005 that Copts should be excluded from becoming presidential candidates—or even called into question their equal standing in society. Recently Habib was quoted in an Egyptian daily arguing for the imposition of additional taxes on Copts. In a country like Egypt, where Copts represent 15 percent of the population, the Brotherhood's conflicting signals are alarming to many. They certainly undermine the Brotherhood claim that it accepts extending democratic rights to all members of the society.

If the Brotherhood indeed tries to establish a political party, a clarification of its attitudes towards Copts will acquire increased urgency. The movement has always excluded non-Muslims from its ranks, and this is legitimate, indeed normal, as long as the Brotherhood remains a purely religious movement. If the Brotherhood launches a party, that party by law must be open to all Egyptians regardless of religious affiliation. If the Brotherhood continues issuing contradictory statements about citizenship and Copts, the Brotherhood will—and should—be treated with suspicion in the West and among Egyptians who believe in democracy.

Women

The Muslim Brotherhood also needs to address more clearly the issue of universal citizenship with regard to women. The Muslim Brotherhood does profess acceptance for women rights—in an Islamic framework. If it wants

credibility in the West, it needs to be much more specific about what that means. There are many controversial issues in all Arab countries surrounding the rights of women—including the right of women to transmit citizenship to their children, inheritance, divorce, the rights over women of male family members, and many others. General statements concerning Islam's respect for women or the necessity of addressing all issues in an Islamist framework are not enough to allay suspicion. It is possible that these and other questions can be answered in a way that satisfies both Western principles and the Islamist framework. For example, the Moroccan Party for Justice and Development declared the country's new personal status code, widely praised in the West, to be compatible with an Islamic framework. The reference to an Islamist framework, in this case, did not raise any alarm in the West, because the code itself is a very specific legal document and nobody was left to guess what the PJD was talking about.

The example of the positive view of the PJD deriving from its acceptance of the Moroccan *mudawana* is a reminder that recognition of the legitimacy of Islamic parties in the West as legitimate political players does not require them to sign on to the most far-reaching interpretations of the rights of women—or men for that matter—that are advocated by some westerners today. The concept of what constitutes a right for men and women is in constant evolution, and the frontier of the interpretation varies from country to country. Respect for women's rights or individual rights in general does not have to be pushed to an extreme for Islamist parties to gain legitimacy. Modesty and women's rights are not necessarily in conflict—unless modesty is interpreted to mean the compulsory wearing of the niqab and the constant supervision by a male relative. As in all other matters, even in this case the key to reciprocal understanding and tolerance is clarity.

The International Stance

We have focused so far on issues where lack of clarity does not allow us to reach conclusions whether the values, principles, and policies advocated by the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood are compatible, although not necessarily identical, to those that predominate in the Western liberal democratic tradition. Acceptance of Islamist movements as legitimate political players, however, does not depend solely on the position they take on these issues. For Western governments in particular, a major concern is whether Islamist parties aim at upsetting the international system. While ultraconservative groups in the West raise the specter of a revived caliphate controlled by Al Qaeda, mainstream policy makers are interested in more concrete, down-to-earth questions. In the case of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, the main foreign policy concern is whether the movement, or a party formed by it, would continue in the case of a rise to power through the ballot box to recognize Egypt's international obligations under existing treaties and agreements the Egyptian government

has signed. Indeed, one of the markers of evolutionary rather than revolutionary change is a commitment to honor past agreements.

Central to the issue, inevitably, is the question whether a government controlled or heavily influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood would accept, and continue to abide by, the Camp David agreement with Israel, thus recognizing the Jewish state and maintaining diplomatic relations with it. The fact that many Arab governments, including the pro-Western governments of Saudi Arabia and Lebanon, do not recognize Israel, should not lead the Muslim Brotherhood to delude itself that any move on the part of a government of which they are part to abandon the treaty and sever diplomatic relations with Israel would not immediately lead to an uproar in the West. Most immediately, it is certain that the failure to state clearly the Muslim Brotherhood's position concerning recognition of all treaties signed by Egypt would perpetuate the pariah status of the Muslim Brotherhood in the eyes of Western governments.

It is not merely signed agreements with Israel that are at issue. The Egyptian government has also ratified a number of international conventions. Specifically, it has ratified the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (1967); the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1981); the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1982); the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1982); the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (1986); and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990). These conventions are not completely respected in Egypt, just as they are not completely respected in most countries. Nevertheless a decision to reject previous international commitments by the Egyptian state would greatly delegitimize the Muslim Brotherhood internationally.

A somewhat less crucial but still important issue the Muslim Brotherhood would be well-advised to clarify is its position on economic issues. Choices of economic policies, particularly in today's globalized world, are not simply a domestic political choice. Any radical change in economic policy affects external actors as well, particularly those that have investments in a country or trade with it. One issue of considerable concern in the West is that of Islamic banking and how its introduction would affect existing interests and future opportunities. The issue of Islamic banking raises particular concern in the West because it is not well understood.

The Brotherhood's economic platform, as outlined for example in the Reform Initiative 2004 and the electoral platform of 2005 is strikingly inconsistent. Although the Brotherhood has traditionally favored a market economy, it has remained unclear about its position on the government-sponsored privatization programs in Egypt and even put forward a harsh nationalistic rhetoric

mocking the selling of state-owned industries to foreign investors. Recently, some of the Brotherhood's most influential figures in the public space, such as Issam al-'Iryan—the unofficial spokesman of the movement—and Abdul Munim Abul Futuh have even used a clearly leftist rhetoric to denounce the regime for betraying the underprivileged majority in Egypt and turning against the gains of the socialist Nasser era. Equally confusing to outsiders is that the Brotherhood has always sought to reconcile its belief in the market economy with the Islamic principle of justice. The attempt to reconcile economic freedom and justice has led the movement not only to the establishment of private networks of social welfare and to sophisticated debates about Islamic economics, but also to the perception that the state has the duty to spread justice and compensate for market imposed inequalities through different instruments and strategies, including public ownership. These contradictory messages have generated confusion and concern in business circles, which need to be clarified before the Brotherhood can hope to gain acceptance abroad.

Continuing the Dialogue

In writing this explanation of why Islamist parties are regarded with suspicion in the West, we are conscious of the fact that these parties are facing extremely challenging situations. They do not operate in democratic political systems; few if any Arab parties, whether government or opposition, have the democratic and transparent internal governance structure; tolerance of dissent is low in most countries and the concept of universal citizenship is not always respected. Few Arab governments, in other words, would meet the criteria by which Islamist parties are judged. Many secular opposition parties would not meet the test either.

But the question we are constantly being asked is what Islamist parties would need to do to gain credibility in the West, and as a result we have focused on what we perceive to be the problematic aspects in the positions of those parties.

We see this reply as the beginning of a dialogue we hope will lead eventually to greater clarity on all sides.

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