

## IN UNCHARTED WATERS: ISLAMIST PARTIES BEYOND EGYPT'S MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD

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Arab Islamist parties faced exceptional challenges and opportunities following the 2011 uprisings. After decades of facing authoritarian regimes, they suddenly had to navigate in radically new domestic, regional, and intra-Islamist contexts. Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood had the most spectacular rise and fall, but its experience was atypical of other Islamist parties, which adapted more successfully. These changes overhauled the structure, ideology, and strategy of these parties in ways that unsettled long-standing expectations about their ideas and behavior.

### Trends for Islamist Parties

- Islamist parties were poorly equipped to deal with the political openings after the Arab uprisings in 2011, but many have adapted to the aftermath in diverse and pragmatic ways.
- The rise and fall of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood was critically important across the region, but its experience was not typical compared to other regional Islamist parties.
- Islamist parties have continued to participate successfully in democratic elections despite domestic and regional pressures.
- The challenges to the organizational coherence and hierarchy of many Islamist movements and the failures of their older leaders have led to internal arguments over leadership, ideology, and strategy.
- Islamist parties that have traditionally positioned themselves as alternatives to violent jihadi organizations are struggling with increasingly radical and sectarian regional trends.

### Findings and Recommendations

- Islamist parties should be viewed not as uniquely ideological actors but as rational political movements responding to distinctive political opportunities and challenges in each of their countries.
- Islamist parties will continue to play an important role in the politics of most Arab states, despite the pressures they have faced in recent years.
- Because Islamist parties tend to adapt to the political environment in which they operate, regimes should allow opportunities for their continued participation in formal politics rather than force them underground or into violent resistance.
- Islamist parties have typically positioned themselves as centrist movements, providing a means for Islamically oriented citizens to participate nonviolently in mainstream political life. They gain by defending this middle ground rather than veering toward extreme stances that would ultimately marginalize them.
- The rise of the self-proclaimed Islamic State and other Salafi-jihadi movements challenged Islamist parties by offering a seemingly more successful model of action. The need for effective firewalls against radicalization is why the Islamic State's military and political setbacks, especially in Iraq, could create opportunities for the revival of mainstream political Islamist alternatives.

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