

# Islamism, Revolution, and Civil Society

By Sheri Berman

Over recent decades, Islamism—the belief that Islam should guide social and political as well as personal life—has become a powerful force throughout much of the Muslim world. Through a discussion of the Egyptian case, this essay shows how the rise of Islamism can be illuminated by findings of the literatures on revolution and civil society, and vice versa. As many leading theories on revolutions would predict, the necessary precondition for Islamism’s rise has been the declining efficacy and legitimacy of the state. Yet what has occurred in Egypt (and other parts of the Arab world) is not a successful revolution but a peculiar stalemate in which the existing regime retains political power while ceding substantial control over the societal and cultural spheres to the revolutionary challenger—an outcome that the literature does not envision. This stalemate, in turn, is largely a consequence of Islamists’ ability to expand their presence in civil society. This expansion in Egypt and other Arab countries over recent decades is thus best understood as a sign not of benign liberalization, but rather of profound political failure, and as an incubator for illiberal radicalism.

Over recent decades, Islamism—the belief that Islam should guide social and political as well as personal life—has become a powerful force throughout much of the Muslim world, especially in Arab countries. Believing that the Islamic community is mired in a state of barbarism, Islamists seek not merely stricter religious observance or a change in political leadership but a revolutionary transformation of their societies. What defines them as members of a coherent movement is not their choice of particular means, but rather the nature and scale of their ends—the establishment of an Islamic state.<sup>1</sup> Since the rise of Islamism has had and will probably continue to have profound social, political, and strategic consequences, understanding its emergence and development is of the utmost practical and intellectual importance.

Popular analyses of Islamism have generally explained it with reference to cultural, religious, or regional concerns: the nature of Arab civilization, the tenets of Islam, the Arab-Israeli conflict. Scholarly treatments of the subject, more sensitive to the problems with using such broad and stable variables to explain a variegated and evolving phenomenon, have dug deeper and perceptively analyzed particular national Islamist movements and the regimes they confront. These studies, however, have rarely been integrated into or informed by wider-ranging literatures and debates in political science. This is unfortunate, since the true contours of the Islamist challenge, both where it conforms to historical norms and where it deviates from them, can be understood

only within a broader comparative framework—and political science has at its fingertips impressive bodies of research capable of providing significant analytical purchase on the phenomenon.

Some scholars, for example, have viewed the rise of Islamism through the lens of the literature on transitions from authoritarianism to democracy. From this perspective, what is most notable about Islamists is their prominent role in civil society organizations and their status as rising oppositions pressing regimes for political change. These factors are often considered to mark Islamists as examples of, or agents for, liberalization.<sup>2</sup> This essay will instead draw on the revolutions literature, arguing that much of what is occurring in the Arab world can be understood as an example of a prerevolutionary situation.<sup>3</sup> In this light, the rise of Islamism appears less benign than it does in much of the transitions-influenced literature, and the movement’s pervasive presence in civil society is both more intriguing and less heartening.

Although it may seem an unusual choice, bringing in the revolutions literature makes sense for three reasons. First and most obvious, Islamist movements explicitly state that revolution is their objective, and so it seems logical to take them at their word and view their significance and actions through the prism of previous work on movements with comparable goals.<sup>4</sup> Second, many of the variables highlighted in the revolutions literature seem to play an important role in contemporary Middle Eastern politics. And third, examining Islamism in the context of the revolutions literature provides us with a rare opportunity to analyze a potentially revolutionary process playing out in real time. For the most part, revolutions have been examined after the fact. While nothing is necessarily wrong with this, limiting the study of revolutions to those that have already occurred risks introducing a methodological bias into the literature, one that we can and should correct by analyzing cases that display the standard features of a prerevolutionary situation but whose outcome remains in doubt.<sup>5</sup> Hence, a study of Islamism holds out the promise of

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*Sheri Berman is a visiting scholar at the Center for European Studies at New York University (seberman@hotmail.com). She is currently finishing up a book entitled *The Primacy of Politics: Social Democracy and the Ideological Dynamics of the Twentieth Century*. The author thanks Michael Scott Doran, Michelle Penner Angrist, E. Gregory Gause III, Jeff Goodwin, Gideon Rose, and the Perspectives reviewers for helpful advice.*

teaching students of revolution some valuable lessons about the applicability and usefulness of existing theories.

This essay, accordingly, will examine the rise of Islamism from an explicitly comparative and theoretical perspective, focusing on the Egyptian case in particular. The fate of Egypt—the largest Arab country, and one of the most influential—has great substantive importance. Furthermore, Egypt has played a special role in the intellectual and political evolution of Islamism. As a result of this and the country's relative openness, events there have been particularly well documented and scholars have produced a number of excellent studies of the rise and rationale of Islamism. Furthermore, to a degree, Egypt can stand in for other Middle Eastern countries, an issue that I will take up later.

What the case demonstrates is that the necessary precondition for the rise of Islamism has been the declining efficacy and legitimacy of the Egyptian state—just as many leading theories on revolutions would predict. This development alone, however, has not been sufficient to turn a potentially revolutionary situation into a successful revolution. Instead, what has occurred in Egypt and other parts of the Arab world is a peculiar kind of stalemate in which the existing regime retains political power while ceding substantial control over the societal and cultural spheres to the revolutionary challenger—an outcome that the revolutions literature does not envision. This stalemate, in turn, is largely a consequence of Islamists' ability to expand their presence in civil society. The expansion of civil society in Egypt and other Arab countries over recent decades is thus best understood as a sign not of benign liberalization but of profound political failure, and as an incubator for illiberal radicalism.<sup>6</sup>

## You Say You Want a Revolution

Because of their dramatic nature and consequences, revolutions have always attracted a great deal of attention. The most prominent popular approach to explaining them, and one that is quite often heard in contemporary analyses of Islamism, focuses on social and psychological factors: the accumulation of societal grievances; the development of pervasive discontent, frustration, and (relative) deprivation; a growing discrepancy between the values of an existing regime and its citizens.<sup>7</sup> These factors are believed to generate “a purposive, broadly based movement . . . which consciously undertakes to overthrow the existing government, and perhaps the entire social order.”<sup>8</sup> This perspective focuses, in other words, on “why, when, and how large numbers of individual men and women become discontented”<sup>9</sup> and views revolutions as the work of revolutionary movements generated by widespread social and psychological strains and tensions.

Despite its familiarity and superficial plausibility, however, this approach to the study of revolutions has fundamental flaws, the most obvious being a lack of empirical verification. For example, if this theory is correct, then “the ultimate and sufficient condition for revolution is the withdrawal of this consensual support” and “no regime could survive if the masses were consciously disgruntled.”<sup>10</sup> But as we know, many do. The theory also leads us to expect revolutions to be fairly common, when in fact they are rare. As Leon Trotsky once noted, “[T]he mere existence of

privations is not enough to cause an insurrection; if it were, the masses would always be in revolt.”<sup>11</sup>

Such an approach also sidesteps and undertheorizes the most critical component of revolutions—the breakdown of the old order—because it is seen as flowing inexorably from social and psychological strains and tensions among the populace. This failing has been addressed most forcefully by Theda Skocpol, who revolutionized the study of revolutions by insisting that any explanation must be able to account for “the emergence (not ‘making’) of a revolutionary situation within an old regime.”<sup>12</sup> Rather than viewing revolutions as the work of revolutionary movements, Skocpol argues that such movements become significant threats only *after* a revolutionary situation has already begun to emerge.<sup>13</sup> As she has observed, “[T]he fact is that historically no successful revolution has been ‘made’ by a mass-mobilizing, avowedly revolutionary movement.”<sup>14</sup> Revolutionary movements, even those “with large, ideologically imbued mass followings,” never create the crises they exploit.<sup>15</sup>

How, then, do revolutionary crises emerge? Through the “breakdown of the administrative and coercive powers of an old order.”<sup>16</sup> It is not the strength of challengers that analysts should focus on, Skocpol asserts, but rather the weakness of the incumbent regime. But why do states lose power and control over their societies? According to this camp, because they are unable to respond effectively to the challenges they face. Skocpol herself focuses on challenges emanating from the international system: military defeat or geopolitical or economic competition can severely stress inflexible and inefficient political institutions and undermine the authority and legitimacy of weak, vulnerable states. “Modern social revolutions,” Skocpol argues, “have happened only in countries situated in disadvantaged positions within international arenas. In particular, the realities of military backwardness or political dependency have crucially affected the occurrence and course of social revolutions.”<sup>17</sup>

In complementary analyses, other scholars have explored challenges to states emerging from the domestic sphere. Samuel Huntington, for example, has noted:

Revolution is . . . an aspect of modernization. It is not something which can occur in any type of society at any period in its history. It is not a universal category but rather an historically limited phenomenon. It will not occur in highly traditional societies with very low levels of social and economic complexity. Nor will it occur in highly modern societies. Like other forms of violence and instability, it is most likely to occur in societies which have experienced some social and economic development and where the processes of political modernization and political development have lagged behind the processes of social and economic change.<sup>18</sup>

In modernizing societies, development has proceeded far enough to offer citizens a glimpse of what modernity has to offer, but not far enough to deliver it; in such societies, states are thus under significant pressure to perform a growing range of functions and satisfy ever-increasing demands. Moreover, since with the onset of development traditional institutions and norms begin to fall apart fairly rapidly but modern ones take a longer time to emerge, modernizing states tend to lack institutional mechanisms capable of handling these growing demands. The weaker, less flexible, and

less efficient a country's institutions are, the greater the state's loss of control and legitimacy, and the larger the potential for disorder and violence.<sup>19</sup>

Jack Goldstone, meanwhile, has also focused on the connection between domestic pressures and state breakdown, looking not at modernization but at the chain reactions caused by the inability of state institutions to handle rapid population growth.<sup>20</sup> In the seventeenth century, he notes, large agrarian states

were not equipped to deal with the impact of the steady growth of population that then began throughout northern Eurasia. . . . The implications of this ecological shift went far beyond mere issues of poverty and population dislocation. Pressure on resources led to persistent price inflation. Because the tax systems of most early modern states were based on fixed rates of taxation on people or land, tax revenues lagged behind prices. States thus had no choice but to seek to expand taxation. . . . Yet attempts to increase state revenues met resistance from the elites and the populace and thus rarely succeeded in offsetting spiraling expenses. As a result, most major states in the seventeenth century were . . . headed for fiscal crisis.<sup>21</sup>

In short, Skocpol and other theorists encourage us to view revolutions as a two-stage process, with the weakening and discrediting of existing political institutions creating a (potentially) revolutionary situation, followed by or overlapping with the rise of revolutionary movements and their attack on the status quo. As we will see, in the Egyptian case the first stage of the revolutionary process has played out by the book. In recent decades, the Egyptian state has faced a variety of challenges, including military defeat, modernization, and rapid population growth. Unable to cope, it has suffered a steady loss of popular support and legitimacy—a problem that has been exacerbated by the regime's resorting to repression as a way of maintaining control. The result has been the opening of a political space for a potential revolutionary challenger.

However, this is only the first stage in any revolutionary process: declining state legitimacy and efficacy can open up a political space that revolutionary movements can exploit, but if we want to know *whether* any movement will be able to do so,<sup>22</sup> or *which movement* will emerge at the forefront, an analysis of the state can get us only so far.<sup>23</sup> If we want to truly understand the trajectories of revolutions in general, and the dynamics of Islamism in Egypt and elsewhere in particular, we need to analyze how and why some movements are able to develop the powerful organizations, cross-class coalitions, and ideologically imbued supporters that we know from previous studies are the hallmarks of successful revolutionary movements.<sup>24</sup> As we will see in the Egyptian case, one way that they do this is to exploit the possibilities offered by civil society—which in these circumstances has played a role quite different from what many of its cheerleaders would expect.

Civil society has become a hot topic in recent years, both inside and outside the academy. Although one can find in the literature almost as many definitions of civil society as there are treatments of it, the term generally refers to all voluntary institutions and associations that exist below the level of the state but above the level of the family:<sup>25</sup> churches, clubs, civic groups, professional organizations, nongovernmental organizations, and so forth.<sup>26</sup> To its many proponents, civil society is both an indicator of and a

prerequisite for a healthy democracy and society. Especially after the collapse of the Soviet empire, civil society was seen as “the opposite of despotism”<sup>27</sup> and as embodying “for many an ethical ideal of the social order.”<sup>28</sup> Civil society activity is said to produce the “habits of the heart necessary for stable and effective democratic institutions.”<sup>29</sup> It is supposed to moderate attitudes, promote social interaction, facilitate trust, and increase solidarity and public spiritedness. Participation in civil society allegedly teaches citizens to be engaged and broad-minded, while at the same time training the activists and leaders that a democracy requires and lays the grounds for successful economic and social development.<sup>30</sup>

Given the dominance of such views in the discipline as a whole, it is not surprising that they have made their way into Middle Eastern studies as well. Many scholars have thus seen the expansion of civil society activity in many parts of the Arab world in recent decades as reason to be optimistic about the region's chances for political liberalization and even democratization. The most prolific and influential observer of the trend, for example, has argued that “the development of civil society is a crucial step toward realizing a freer Middle East.”<sup>31</sup> Following such reasoning, major foundations have thrown money at the topic and underwritten research to track the trend's growth and expected beneficial effects.<sup>32</sup>

What the civil society advocates have not sufficiently appreciated, however, is that the nature of civil society's influence is dependent on political context, among other things. Absent strong and healthy political institutions, a rise in civil society activity may be a cause for concern rather than jubilation and may signal and deepen political problems rather than mitigate them.<sup>33</sup> This is what has happened in Egypt and many parts of the Arab world more generally. The expansion of civil society there is best understood as a reflection and cause of local states' declining effectiveness and legitimacy. Civil society has served, moreover, as the base from which Islamist revolutionaries have launched an impressive challenge to the status quo.<sup>34</sup>

## The Decline of the State

In Egypt and in many other parts of the Middle East, the 1950s and 1960s represented “the highwater mark of the mass-mobilizing state . . . with its all-pervasive bureaucracy, mass production factory system and official culture.”<sup>35</sup> Under Gamal Abdel Nasser's leadership, the Egyptian state undertook a far-reaching program of social and economic development known as Arab socialism, embracing nationalizations, land reform, and giant prestige projects like the Aswan High Dam. In order to maintain support for its ambitious goals, the state entered into a “covenant” with its subjects “in which the subjects relinquished their claims to basic human and civil rights in return for the state undertaking to provide them with education and health care, employment and subsidies.”<sup>36</sup> Nasser's international agenda was no less ambitious than his domestic one, as he was the foremost advocate of pan-Arabism—a movement that took as its goal the political unification of all Arab lands and found expression during this era in the League of Arab States, the Arab Federation of Iraq and Jordan, and the United Arab Republic.

By the late 1960s, however, the lofty ambitions and high hopes that Nasser and pan-Arabism inspired came down to earth. Internationally, the Egyptian state and pan-Arabism suffered a number of serious blows, including the breakup of the United Arab Republic, the Yemen civil war, and most importantly, the rout at the hands of the Israelis in 1967. As one observer points out, “That occurrence was the most shattering event in Egypt’s contemporary history. ‘Why were we so utterly defeated?’—the soul searching question echoed all over the country.”<sup>37</sup> Domestically, meanwhile, things were going just as badly. The heavy-handed state-led development model that Nasser embraced in an attempt to modernize the country stifled the private sector and saddled the government with responsibility for everything from education and employment to health care and transportation subsidies. Egypt’s economic situation declined dramatically; from the 1970s through the 1990s, unemployment rose steadily while per capita GNP and average real wages fell.

Exacerbating the problems was the simultaneous massive population growth that the country, and indeed the entire region, experienced.<sup>38</sup> As one commentator notes,

Egypt’s social question is a problem of numbers. . . . In 1800 Egypt had a population of about 5 million. . . . [T]oday it is around 60 million—a 1,200 percent increase in less than two centuries. All of this population growth, moreover, has taken place in the fertile valley and delta of the Nile River, a ribbon of territory that makes up only 5 percent of present-day Egypt’s total land area. The remainder of the country is a barren and unpopulated desert. . . . [W]ith its birth rate of 28 per 1,000 more than half of Egypt’s people are under the age of 20, and the dependency ratio is 4 to 1. To put it another way, these figures mean that no more than a fifth to a quarter of the population is actively and gainfully employed.<sup>39</sup>

These demographic trends were even more alarming from a comparative perspective. Between 1980 and 1995, the Middle East had the highest population growth in the world, twice as high as East Asia and even higher than sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>40</sup> Not surprisingly, population increases have dramatically outpaced the growth of per capita income and GNP. Particularly worrisome has been the extremely rapid increase of the region’s “youth rate”: in Egypt and in the Arab world generally, approximately 40 percent of the population is under age 15.<sup>41</sup>

Rapid population growth made it impossible for the Egyptian state to live up to the promises it had made to its citizens in return for political support. The government had tried to guarantee education and subsequent public employment, but economic decline made such pledges unsustainable—and indeed, by the 1980s, Egyptian society became flooded by large numbers of secondary school and university graduates who could not find a job. The ones who were fortunate enough to get a job found that their real wages decreased over time. As one analyst comments,

[T]he regime’s ultimate retreat from the entitlement program stirred intense resentment among would-be recipients who had come to regard state benefits as their “due.” In sum . . . the regime deliberately fostered youth dependence on the state but—under conditions of resources scarcity and under-development—ultimately failed to deliver on its promises. The exhaustion of the statist model . . .

contributed to the rise of a frustrated stratum of educated, under-employed youth “available” for mobilization by opposition groups.<sup>42</sup>

Alongside the slowdown in state employment, the “safety valve” provided by migration to the oil rich states of the Persian Gulf also began to close. Up through the early 1980s, Egyptians flooded into places like Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the Gulf region, but falling oil prices, political disturbances, and the Gulf War severely limited this option.<sup>43</sup> The cumulative result of these trends was a massive rise in unemployment, particularly among the educated.

Thus, by the final quarter of the twentieth century, the Egyptian state had been battered by military defeat and the collapse of pan-Arabism, together with economic failure and overpopulation. It could no longer provide jobs, social services, or a sense of hope and direction to its citizens, and it proved unable or unwilling to respond to the numerous challenges it faced. The government remained relatively resistant to the dramatic liberalizing trends occurring in many other parts of the world and indeed had a tendency to retreat further into an authoritarian and repressive cocoon as problems mounted.<sup>44</sup> Therefore, it became increasingly estranged from its citizens. Surveying the scene in 1995, one observer noted sorrowfully, “At the heart of Egyptian life there lies a terrible sense of disappointment.”<sup>45</sup>

## The Rise of the Islamists

It was against this background that the contemporary Islamist movement in Egypt emerged. Islamist groups relied on a preexisting network of local mosques, communal ties, and legitimacy; had access to funding from local supporters (including many wealthy donors and migrant workers in the Persian Gulf) and from foreign governments, particularly Saudi Arabia;<sup>46</sup> and were somewhat insulated from repression (because the state did not want to be seen as attacking religious institutions or organizations)—so they were able to move into the political, social, and economic void that the retreating Egyptian state left behind.<sup>47</sup> Islamist organizations became the main focus of cultural and community life in many parts of Egypt, especially in poorer areas. In addition, private, grass-roots, voluntary associations run by Islamists became important providers of social goods normally associated with the state. As one activist put it, “We provide services for people who are not able to afford it [or] where there are no government services at all.”<sup>48</sup> Indeed, Islamist associations grew to handle everything from health care and housing to education and employment help. As a result, the movement came to “play a role in social life that governments had once claimed but then abdicated”<sup>49</sup>—with the main difference being that the social services provided by the Islamists tended to be more responsive and efficient. In the words of one observer:

From my own experience, having visited a number of [institutions run by Egyptian Islamist groups], I can tell you that they are far better equipped, the staff is far more professional, the equipment is much more modern, than things you’ll find in the typically run-down government facilities. A perfect example of how the Islamists have responded to social needs with far greater alacrity than the regime was the earthquake in Cairo in 1992. The government was totally

paralyzed. [President Hosni] Mubarak was traveling abroad, and for two days the regime did absolutely *nothing*, nothing at all. Within hours, though, the Islamists were on the streets—with tents, with blankets, with food, with alternative housing. The same thing happened in 1994, in Durunka, when flash-floods carried flaming fuel from an army depot through the streets. Once again, the government was simply incapable of coping and the Islamists filled the void.<sup>50</sup>

Along with the help, however, often came a message: “Islam is the way.” Sometimes this message was only indirect and implicit, conveyed through the success of Islamist groups in providing services and fulfilling needs that the state could or would not. Even when the groups and associations had no political agenda, “their social services inadvertently highlight[ed] the state’s inability to provide such assistance. Thus, they chip[ped] away at the government’s credibility.”<sup>51</sup> They also “provided the space for a diffuse process of ideological outreach and network building by small clusters of independent activists, expanding the base of reformist and militant Islamic political groups alike.”<sup>52</sup> Sometimes, however, the message was delivered explicitly, as when social services were run according to Islamic norms (e.g., gender-segregated health care and interest-free loans),<sup>53</sup> or when schools, tutoring, and other educational services were used to inculcate particular values. Islamist primary schools, for example, offered children not only a rigorous education in relatively uncrowded conditions but also religious indoctrination.<sup>54</sup>

In addition to developing their own civil society organizations, Islamists also became involved in a wide range of existing ones. Thus, beginning in the mid-1970s, Islamist student associations (*jamaat al-Islamiyya*) began to dominate the student unions of most campuses. During the 1970s, the enrollment at Egyptian universities more than doubled while infrastructure and services remained stagnant, and learning conditions as well as job prospects degenerated dramatically. Islamists offered religion as a solution to the crisis, portraying Islam as a “system that was ‘complete and total,’ that could not only interpret the larger world but also transform it.”<sup>55</sup> Backing up this rhetoric were concrete actions, as Islamist associations provided students with everything from photocopied textbooks to low-cost lecture notes to help with housing.

The student associations, furthermore, “were masters at combining practical services with the inculcation of moral standards.” For example, in response to a horribly overburdened transportation system, they purchased minibuses to ferry around female students. As this service became increasingly popular, however, Islamists limited it to women who wore the veil. A similar tactic was applied to dress more generally. To students who had trouble affording clothing, Islamists offered “Islamic garments” practically free of charge.<sup>56</sup> And along with practical services, the movement provided “a sense of community and belonging to students who only recently had been drawn away from their familiar surroundings and families.”<sup>57</sup>

The same thing happened in many of Egypt’s professional associations. By the early 1990s, the Muslim Brotherhood—the largest of Egypt’s Islamist groups—had gained control of the doctors’, engineers’, scientists’, pharmacists’, and lawyers’ syndicates in free and fair elections and provided their constituents with a variety of much-needed services.<sup>58</sup>

The Islamist-led Engineers’ Association [in Egypt] held a conference focused on the needs of the more than 20,000 predominantly young engineers without work. The Islamist leadership of the Medical Association conducted a survey of nearly 25,000 doctors in 12 governorates, in which two-thirds of those interviewed revealed that their salaries were not enough to cover their living costs. The executive boards of the Engineering and Medical Associations have initiated projects in the areas of housing, health care, and insurance, established training programs and pilot small business ventures for new graduates, and exerted pressure on the government to reduce university enrollments.<sup>59</sup>

Indeed, Islamists have been so successful in running these organizations and using them to provide services and a voice to their members that some scholars have argued that under their influence “professional syndicates [became] perhaps the most vibrant institutions of Egyptian civil society.”<sup>60</sup>

All this civil society activism has yielded the Islamist movement many benefits. Grass-roots involvement in practically every nook and cranny of Egyptian life has allowed Islamists to gain insight into the needs and demands of a wide range of citizens (including members of the middle class and elites) and craft their appeals and programs appropriately. As Ali E. Hillal Dessouki, currently minister of youth and sport in the Mubarak government, has noted, these groups are “seeking to gain the support of the average Egyptian one by one, inch by inch, through the provision of welfare facilities, Islamic schools, Islamic clinics, technical schools, economic institutions for profit, social insurance, monthly payments for the poor,” and so forth.<sup>61</sup> The quality of engagement that the Islamists display in each area, moreover, constitutes “a quiet indictment of the government’s inability to provide” basic services to their citizens.<sup>62</sup> By combining their message with concrete social action and offering a real alternative to the existing regime, the Islamists have bolstered their standing and appeal among many different sectors of Egyptian society that feel estranged from and betrayed by the ruling order.

Involvement in civil society has also helped Islamists build a more powerful, flexible, and responsive movement. The infiltration of Egypt’s associational life, for example, has helped the movement recruit and train new leaders. As one observer notes:

The activists who have led the Islamic Trend’s [the platform of the Muslim Brotherhood] entry into the professional associations emerged out of the student *gama’at*. . . . These leaders gained valuable experience providing services, propagating Islamic ideology, countering alternative groups on campus, and negotiating with the regime. The professional associations offered them a channel to continue their political activity after graduation. Participation in the *gama’at* also shaped the political consciousness of a much broader circle of university students, thereby creating a constituency upon which the Islamist candidates could draw, first in the student unions and subsequently in the professional associations. One leftist activist in the Engineers’ Association explained: “You raise Muslim Brother students in the university, then five years later you have an electoral base for the professional associations. It’s like planting seeds on a farm.”<sup>63</sup>

The movement has been comparably skillful in using its position in civil society to tap “members’ knowledge and organizational skills, financial resources, and access to mosques,



Credit: AP/Wide World Photos

An unidentified Egyptian wearing a headband that reads “martyrdom seekers” holds the Koran as demonstrators chant anti-American and anti-Israeli slogans in Cairo, Egypt, on February 28, 2003.

the movement’s extremists while trying to co-opt moderates and burnish its own Islamic credentials. This meant, in addition to brutal repression, “a discernable retreat on the part of the regime from secular politics and culture.”<sup>68</sup> Religious rhetoric began to color official political discourse, and “positions and arguments espoused by different political contenders, including top-ranking state officials, are now often justified or attacked by reference to texts from the Qur’an or the Hadiths.”<sup>69</sup> In addition, moderate Islamists were given access to state resources, particularly the media (which they often used to rail against secularism and advocate an Islamic state).<sup>70</sup>

The power of Egypt’s leading center of Islamic learning, al-Azhar University, also expanded greatly: “In exchange for conferring Islamic legitimation on the state [the dignitaries of al-Azhar] formulated

newspapers, publishing houses, professional associations, and political parties, to mobilize opposition to government policies or the state.”<sup>64</sup> And the dense associational web within which the Islamist movement envelops its supporters has helped build a sense of community and collective identity among them, deepening their commitment to the cause and willingness to sacrifice for it. In a country such as Egypt, where political participation and social activism have generally been discouraged, membership and participation in Islamist associational life has provided many with their first meaningful opportunity to play an active role in their communities and society. One scholar notes (in an assessment that fits in well with the encomiums to civil society so often found in the literature): “Islamists challenged dominant patterns of political alienation and abstention by promoting a new ethic of civic obligation that mandated participation in the public sphere, regardless of its benefits and costs.”<sup>65</sup>

The civil society strategy, finally, has to some extent helped Islamists to avoid government prosecution. The dispersed and local nature of their associational life has made it difficult for the Egyptian state to monitor their activities,<sup>66</sup> while the movement’s scope and success have made it an unattractive target for government attack. As the author of one of the few statistical studies of the Egyptian nongovernmental sector puts it, “The government could not curtail Islamic charity organizations because they are the most dynamic organizations in civil society, and they reach people and regions that the state cannot.”<sup>67</sup>

### The Remains of the Day

Particularly after Hosni Mubarak succeeded Anwar Sadat in 1981, the Egyptian state generally responded to the Islamist challenge with a two-pronged strategy, cracking down harshly on

demands for the Islamization of society, notably in the moral and cultural spheres.”<sup>71</sup> They also promoted the Islamization of school curricula and took it upon themselves to pass judgment more generally on what Egyptians read, saw, and learned. As one scholar notes,

In its efforts to install itself as [society’s] supreme censor . . . the Azhar, at first, began by delivering itself through the issuance of fatwas on an increasing number of public issues, then moved to a more obtrusive role, which manifested itself in direct interventions to ban published books on the ground that they violate Islamic principles, and publicly condemned secular authors. Finally, in an attempt to provide for itself a firm legal ground for screening all material intended for broadcasting, the Azhar solicited the “opinion” of the Administrative court in regard to the extent of its legal authority to do so. In a poorly argued decision, the court ruled that indeed the Azhar’s jurisdiction is unbounded with respect to all matters “related” to Islam. . . . Since virtually all decisions may be “related” to Islam, the negative consequences for freedom flowing from this view were incalculable.<sup>72</sup>

The result was widespread censorship of information and entertainment and the branding of secular intellectuals as heretics, leading to harassment and even physical attacks. In one particularly notorious example, the secular writer Farag Foda was murdered a few days after he was denounced by the authorities of al-Azhar in 1992.

Although such policies were designed, along with the crackdown, to blunt Islamism’s appeal, in practice they had the opposite effect. Moderate Islamists never fully renounced their more radical brethren; indeed, even the Muslim Brotherhood, which openly rejects violence, “continue[d] to act as apologists for [more militant Islamist] groups, portraying them as idealists driven

to . . . reprehensible tactics by the government's corruption, its incompetence in dealing with the country's economic problems, and its failure to fulfill its previous commitment to institute Islamic Shari'a as the law of the land.<sup>73</sup> More importantly, by ceding control of broad swaths of civil society and cultural life to Islamists the state not only "legitimiz[e]d Islamists' demands and encourag[e]d them to escalate the pressure for their fulfillment"<sup>74</sup> but also facilitated a profound transformation of Egyptian life.

Blocked from full political participation and allowed much greater freedom in civil society, the Islamist movement set about Islamizing Egypt from below. To put it another way, the Islamists, finding themselves unable to achieve their revolutionary goals directly by conquering the state, turned to gradually remaking Egyptian society and culture.<sup>75</sup> And in this they have been remarkably successful. Not only has the Islamist movement used its network of civil society organizations to put together what is essentially a "counter-society [that can] propagate the movement's ideas, create support networks for them, and show that Islamic values can be implemented in the contemporary world,"<sup>76</sup> but it has also reshaped everyday life. Perhaps the most obvious manifestation of this in both public and private life has been a general growth in religious observance and the role of Islamic norms and values. "According to government estimates, four thousand new mosques were constructed by the early 1980s. . . . Religious programming on state radio and television exploded, with both moderate and radical sheikhs spreading their message more effectively than ever. Koranic and religious schools mushroomed, and Islamic mystical orders increased fourfold."<sup>77</sup> In addition, "self-censorship emerged in the production of television programs in response to pressure on the state by popular sentiment, and religious programs increased by 50 percent between 1975 and 1990. Islamic sentiment was particularly expressed in a marked decline of alcohol consumption, bars, liquor stores, and night clubs."<sup>78</sup>

It is important to note that these changes have not been limited to the poor and uneducated but have extended to sectors of the elite: "technocrats, socialists and other presumably secular groups."<sup>79</sup> For example, as one observer of Egypt's changing social and cultural life noted, "[a]t Cairo University, a campus that is representative of middle-class Egyptian society, a majority of female students were veiled. And no matter where I went at noontime, whether it was a bank, an athletic club, the central telephone office, the grand bazaar downtown, or even the government press center, all business stopped for prayer."<sup>80</sup> Indeed, the growing role of Islamic values has impacted everything from gender roles and fertility to consumption habits.<sup>81</sup> It has also led to growing social pressures toward conformity to Islamic norms of dress and behavior, such as veiling for women and beards for young men.<sup>82</sup>

The Islamist movement has also forced dramatic changes in the nature and style of governance in Egypt. Islamists have worked themselves into the public and state sectors, including critical areas such as the educational establishment, and have even gained footholds in the army, the police, and certain government ministries. As one observer notes, "Egypt's Islamist revolution by stealth has burrowed its way into the very heart of the institutions of the Arab world's largest and most important state."<sup>83</sup> Another

says, "Leading institutions, once under complete government control, have begun to erode the state's secularist policies. . . . Major institutions . . . are now in the hands of moderate Islamists [and in] neighborhoods and districts across the country popular sheikhs, free of government control, are making decisions on matters ranging from divorce to land ownership and the role of women in society."<sup>84</sup>

The state itself has been forced to make direct concessions to the Islamists on a whole range of issues—for example, by accepting the Shari'a as the "regulating principle for the community." This particular decision, in turn, has provided Islamists with an opportunity to transform Egypt's judicial system and to use it to attack a wide range of social and cultural norms and practices. "[L]ike other central institutions of Egyptian life, including the universities, al-Azhar, and the professional unions, the court system . . . slipp[ed] away from the secular regime."<sup>85</sup> Perhaps the most (in)famous example generated by the growing Islamization of the judicial system was the case of Abu Zaid, a university professor accused by Islamists of publishing blasphemous works. Backed by Islamist lawyers, Islamists charged Zaid with heresy and argued that as a heretic he could no longer remain married to his Muslim wife. In 1995 the Egyptian Appellate Court agreed with this charge and ordered Zaid to end his marriage. A few weeks later, the couple fled to the Netherlands.<sup>86</sup> After prosecuting Zaid, Islamists turned their attention to using the courts to silence other secular intellectuals and to imposing "Islamic" mores and values on society.

In short, while the Islamist movement has not been able to topple the Egyptian state, it has contributed to isolating it still further from its people and transforming the country's society and culture to such a degree that some scholars refer to what has occurred as the "Islamization of society" or a "cultural revolution." Indeed, the changes in Egypt have been so striking that some have even argued that the country is "already well on its way to becoming a near-Islamic state"<sup>87</sup> and "may indeed be more genuinely Islamized than Iran."<sup>88</sup> A nation "long considered an outpost of democracy and secularism in the Arab world is quietly being transformed into an Islamic order."<sup>89</sup>

A similar pattern can be detected elsewhere in the Arab world. Just as in Egypt, by the late 1960s the implicit social contract struck between many Arab governments and their citizens began to fall apart.<sup>90</sup> Economic decline set in across much of the region; demographic trends exacerbated economic problems and created a large pool of unemployed, frustrated youth along with destabilizing urban migrations; and the military impotence of Arab regimes against Israel was brutally revealed. States proved unable or unwilling to respond to these challenges and so lost popular support and legitimacy. Islamist groups stepped into the political space thus opened and managed to go a long way toward satisfying the basic economic and social needs of many citizens.

In Algeria, for example, the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) rose to a position where it was poised to win national elections in 1992 as the result of a dynamic similar to the one we saw in Egypt. By the mid 1980s, Algeria was in dire economic straits and more than 60 percent of the population was under 25 years old. The state had largely abdicated its public responsibilities, so most

Algerians were left without basic services or hope for the future. The Islamist movement used an extensive associational network to provide the social services, community and recreational groups, and economic support that Algerians desperately needed.<sup>91</sup> Such activities and programs helped the movement attract widespread support while undermining the state's legitimacy, a pattern further displayed when an earthquake hit the country in 1989: "The Islamists were the first to respond and did so effectively. They, rather than the government, supplied blankets and medicine, and this scored further points while the government reinforced its image of ineffectiveness."<sup>92</sup>

Algerian Islamist organizations also provided citizens with some of the country's few genuine opportunities for political involvement and debate. As one participant recalls, in such associations Algerians could meet to discuss "all the problems that the Algerian nation was confronting. We spoke about everything . . . the economy . . . all aspects of life."<sup>93</sup> Not surprisingly, the Islamists were able to use such success in civil society to mobilize supporters and construct a powerful political machine. "When [the FIS] became a legal entity in 1989, [the movement's civil society] associations became the support network of the new party."<sup>94</sup> The FIS was able to attract "a broad base of support across the country . . . [and bring] a level of organization and ideological commitment, lacking in other sectors of society, as well as an impressive record of social responsibility and welfare" to the struggle against the existing regime.<sup>95</sup> Only the suspension of the voting and the imposition of martial law prevented the FIS from taking full control of the country.

Lebanon represents another disturbing variation on this theme. The state was never as powerful or centralized as its Egyptian or Algerian counterparts, but its collapse was even more spectacular. As the country descended into civil war in the 1970s, Islamists and Hezbollah in particular moved in to provide desperately needed services to hundreds of thousands of Lebanese—especially Shi'ites, the country's largest and poorest religious group. Hezbollah-affiliated associations now supply citizens with medical care, hospitals, housing, clean water, schools, and more. In addition to providing material aid, Hezbollah also sponsors a wide range of recreational and communal associations that help it attract supporters, spread its ideology, and gradually reshape society from within. At one Hezbollah-supported facility, for example, an American visitor observed "disabled veterans spend[ing] their days weaving baskets, taking computer classes and carving souvenirs with the group's logo that features an AK-47 machine gun clutched in a raised fist." Its civil society activities allow the movement to "keep tabs on the recipients' political feelings and religious observance,"<sup>96</sup> and Hezbollah has thus been able to win "the hearts and minds of new supporters" and build its backing "from the grass roots up."<sup>97</sup>

### Something Old, Something New

In comparative historical perspective, three aspects of the Egyptian Islamist case are noteworthy: that state failure preceded the revolutionary challenge, that the state has not collapsed, and that the revolutionary movement has managed to effect a profound social and cultural transformation nonetheless. The first is

consistent with reigning theories of revolution and, indeed, just what one would expect to find, given the basic features of the situation. The second highlights lacunae in the state-centric revolutions literature, but also suggests places where the literature's insights can push our understanding forward. The third, finally, is unusual and intriguing and is due to the revolutionaries' clever exploitation of civil society—which in the particular political context found in Egypt and other parts of the Arab world has ended up playing a role quite different than some civil society promoters would predict.<sup>98</sup>

In recent decades political scientists interested in revolutions have been taught to look past colorful challengers and first examine the decrepit incumbents those challengers seek to replace. They have realized, in other words, that the game must be lost by the old regime before it can be won by the new one. Many scholars have come to understand state failure, moreover, in terms of a gap between the challenges a state faces and its ability to respond successfully to them. And common challenges include military weakness, the strains of modernization, and rapid population growth. The rise of Islamism in Egypt, it turns out, is a textbook example of all these variables in action.

Humiliation by a tiny hated enemy (Israel), the collapse of grandiose diplomatic schemes, dependence on an alien outside power (the United States)—to call the international track record of the Egyptian state from the late 1960s onward unimpressive would be charitable. The one seeming triumph, moreover—the peace treaty with Israel that gained the return of the Sinai Peninsula and a steady stream of American aid—is instead viewed by the Egyptian public as a sign of the state's weakness, an abandonment of the Palestinians, and a cause of increased subordination to the United States.

Domestically, meanwhile, the picture looks even worse. The standard stresses that accompany modernization and capitalist development have been magnified by generally misguided government policies, with the result that continued poverty, unemployment, inequality, and repression have offered little but frustration to an ever-increasing population. By shrinking the world, globalization has only exacerbated the problem. "The new age of globalization," one observer notes, "has hit the Arab world in a very strange way. Its societies are open enough to be disrupted by modernity, but not so open that they can ride the wave. . . . Globalization in the Arab world is the critic's caricature of globalization—a slew of Western products and billboards with little else."<sup>99</sup>

Furthermore, the pervasiveness of repression and authoritarianism (in Egypt and the Arab world more generally) has only contributed to a growing rejection of existing states by their citizens. Leaders in most of these countries are chosen not on the basis of merit or popularity, but because of bloodlines or control over the means of force. Additionally, in response to rising grievances and frustration, the rulers of many of these countries have cracked down further on opposition, thus closing off legitimate alternative channels for the airing of grievances and increasing the use of violence against their citizens. While examples from Algeria to Weimar Germany make clear that political openness and elections alone cannot ward off revolutions, those countries



in the Middle East that have experienced some political reform or liberalization (e.g., Morocco, Qatar, Jordan) have been less threatened by extremism than have their more autocratic counterparts. And history has shown time and time again that although authoritarian regimes may be able to control opposition through repression and coercion, denying formal opportunities for political grievances to be voiced does not make the grievances disappear—it only forces them underground or directs them into alternative channels.<sup>100</sup>

The result of these developments, in Egypt and across much of the Arab region, has been the emergence of a classic “Huntingtonian” gap, as mobilization, aspirations, and expectations have increased dramatically while existing state and political institutions have proved unable or unwilling to respond. Accompanying this has been an estrangement of the region’s citizens from their governments. As one observer has noted, “Egyptians’ attitudes towards their government could be summed up with one word: Animosity. They believe ‘that this country is not their country but the country of rich people and thieves. . . . They love Egypt. But they hate the government.’”<sup>101</sup> Under these conditions, the surprise would not be the emergence of some kind of revolutionary challenge, but the absence of one.

The fact remains, however, that despite its demonstrable failure, the Egyptian state—like most of its regional counterparts—has not yet collapsed or been toppled. The state-centric revolutions literature, in other words, helps us understand why a revolutionary movement (Islamism) has emerged in Egypt and other parts of the Arab world, but it is less helpful in predicting whether the challenge to the old regime will be successful. What the Egyptian case highlights, therefore, is a limitation in the state-centric revolutions literature: the ambiguity or indeterminacy of terms like “weakness” or “decline.” In historical cases of revolution, we can tell that state strength diminished “far enough” by the presence of a revolution, but this way of assessing the situation is both intellectually and methodologically problematic. In order to increase this literature’s analytical utility, we need to have ways of determining the value of its independent variable (i.e., the extent of state weakness/decline) separate from its dependent one (revolution or lack thereof).

This is not to say, however, that the state-centric revolutions literature provides no purchase on the phenomenon of regime perseverance in Egypt and other parts of the Arab world in the face of immense declines in efficacy and legitimacy. In particular, Skocpol’s admonition that those interested in revolutions pay attention to international factors is very helpful here. Although in most historical cases of revolution a state’s ability to retain control over the instruments of repression—its final bulwark against the loss of power—has been intimately linked to its broader domestic power and support, this is generally not true in Arab countries. Egypt’s geostrategic importance, for example, has led to massive amounts of American aid and relative indulgence by the international community. Indeed, in the Arab world more generally, windfall oil and gas revenues—together with American aid and the support that authoritarian regimes in the region provide for one another—have acted as a *deus ex machina*, allowing states to maintain impressive military, police, and domestic intelligence

capabilities, as well as relationships with critical social groups, without having to worry too much about widespread declines in societal support and legitimacy. Without these external sources of support, there is every reason to believe that many regimes in the region, including the Egyptian one, would find it much more difficult if not impossible to hold on to power.<sup>102</sup> Skocpol urged consideration of states’ international positions and relationships to analyze why some succumb to revolution, so it should hardly be surprising that the same factors can work the other way, to bolster state power.<sup>103</sup>

Given the discontinuous nature of political change as well as the Middle East’s many sources of potential volatility, the region’s situation could shift at a moment’s notice. Withdrawal of American support, the outcome of a war and regime change in Iraq, an escalation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict—any or all of these things could have a dramatic effect on the various Middle Eastern regimes. Still, regime persistence rather than collapse is the most likely scenario in Egypt and the rest of the Arab world for the foreseeable future. Yet ironically, perhaps, it is at precisely this point that the case becomes most interesting and begins to inform the literature on revolutions, for the situation in Egypt and many other Arab countries appears to have settled into an unusual stalemate. The state is managing to hang on to power but is hollowing out; it has essentially ceded a significant degree of control over society and culture to its revolutionary challenger. Neither a simple success nor a failure for either side, this hybrid situation has received some attention from regionalists,<sup>104</sup> but its larger theoretical and comparative implications remain relatively unexplored.

The key to understanding this unexpected turn of events, I suggest, lies in the particular strategy adopted by Islamist revolutionaries, who have gained a surprising amount of power through the back door by infiltrating their countries’ civil societies. If one shortcoming of the state-centric revolutions literature highlighted by the Egyptian case is the indeterminacy of the critical concepts of state weakness and decline, another is the relative lack of attention paid to precisely how revolutionary movements develop the powerful organizations, cross-class coalitions, and ideologically imbued supporters that enable them to pose a viable challenge to existing regimes. In the Egyptian case, a critical component of Islamist success has been the movement’s infiltration of civil society. This civil society-based strategy, in turn, has enabled the movement to begin transforming life from the bottom up. Islamic values and norms have permeated almost all sectors of society, affecting everything from gender roles to consumption habits, entertainment to education. Even governance has not been exempt.

What seems to have occurred, in other words, is a reversal of the traditional revolutionary pattern. In most revolutions, political change precedes societal and cultural transformation: the state is captured and the new regime then begins constructing a new order. In Egypt, however, societal and cultural transformation has preceded, and perhaps substituted for, political change: here “a grassroots movement emerg[ed] from the streets . . . to transform the social structure from the bottom-up.”<sup>105</sup> One Islamic scholar put it well when he told a Western reporter that “Egypt was

undergoing an Islamic revolution that was peaceful and quietist. We don't need to overthrow the state because we are achieving our aims without violent insurrection."<sup>106</sup> What the Egyptian case seems to indicate, then, is that in some ways the capture of civil society can be as powerful an agent of revolutionary change as the capture of the state itself. Hence, those comparativists and regionalists who view the Islamist movement as a failure because it has not captured the state may be missing the larger picture, or at least an important part of it.<sup>107</sup>

Interestingly, the Islamist case is not the first one in which a thoroughly illiberal revolutionary movement has furthered its prospects by exploiting civil society. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Germany's civil society expanded in inverse relation to the responsiveness and legitimacy of existing state and (certain) political institutions. The Weimar Republic in particular saw a flowering of associational life, and then—as in much of the Arab world now—the growing strength of civil society activity boded ill rather than well. The infiltration and capture of a wide range of voluntary associations helped a revolutionary challenger—the Nazi party—create a powerful political machine and construct a true cross-class coalition.<sup>108</sup> In Weimar Germany as in Egypt, moreover, it appears that at least one reason the revolutionary challenger adopted a civil society strategy is that it was unable to mount a successful direct challenge to the state. (When Hitler tried this strategy in 1923—the ill-fated Beer Hall Putsch—he found himself in jail, and when Islamists mounted violent attacks in Egypt and elsewhere they were eventually crushed.) What these cases may indicate is that where a revolutionary movement faces a weakened but still functioning state, a civil society approach that allows the gradual accumulation of support, skills, and organization, rather than open confrontation, may be the most logical and efficient strategy.

A final important lesson that the Egyptian case teaches is that at least in certain contexts, the civil society skeptics may have a clearer vision than the boosters. The growth of civil society should not be considered an undisputed good, but a politically neutral multiplier—neither inherently “good” nor “bad,” but dependent for its effects on the wider political environment and the values of those who control it.

Where existing political institutions are weak and the regime is perceived as ineffectual and illegitimate, as in Egypt and Weimar Germany, civil society may become an alternative to traditional politics, increasingly absorbing citizens' energies and satisfying their basic needs. In such situations, civil society can work to undermine political stability further by alienating citizens from traditional political structures, deepening dissatisfaction, and providing a rich soil for oppositional and revolutionary movements to mobilize and grow.<sup>109</sup> Furthermore, many of the benefits of associationalism stressed by civil society advocates—providing individuals with political and social skills, creating bonds among citizens, facilitating mobilization, decreasing barriers to collective action, training activists and leaders—do clearly exist, but they can be turned to antidemocratic as well as democratic ends. In short, absent clear specification of the surrounding political context and the character of the groups involved, there is no reason to believe that civil society activity

will have democratic, liberal, or even particularly laudable results.

Such a finding has practical and theoretical implications, since the “dogma holding that strengthening civil society is the key to creating and sustaining a healthy polity has come to dominate the thinking of major charitable foundations as well as human rights and humanitarian organizations.”<sup>110</sup> Two authorities recently noted, “A term that was scarcely used within the aid community ten years ago has become a ubiquitous concept in discussions and documents about democracy promotion worldwide.”<sup>111</sup> Yet if civil society is promoted in the context of weak and illegitimate states, Western donors may find themselves unwillingly or indirectly furthering the cause of revolutionary movements, rather than assisting in a benign process of democratic development.<sup>112</sup>

It seems clear that what Egypt and many other Arab countries need most at this point is not stronger civil societies, but rather more effective and responsive political institutions. Without a state able and willing to respond to the basic needs and demands of its people, all the civil society promotion in the world will have only a limited impact on the life chances of ordinary citizens and may also serve to push countries further down the path of political instability and even violence.<sup>113</sup> While it is certainly much easier to fund social groups and nongovernmental organizations than it is to encourage healthy state development and push authoritarian regimes to undertake real political reform, the latter two efforts are truly necessary if progressive political change and effective economic development are to occur in Egypt and other countries like it.

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## Notes

- 1 Sivan 1990a; Esposito 1999; Esposito et al. 1997; Kepel 1985; Kepel 2002.
- 2 On the debate over democratic prospects, see Norton 1993; Sadowski 1993; Krämer 1992; Schwedler 1995; Zubaida 1992. Other scholars, however, noting the comparative paucity of democratic systems in the region, have also turned to the transitions literature for insight as to what might make the Middle East an “exception that proves the rule.” Heydemann 2002.
- 3 Bayat 1998.
- 4 Whether some Islamist groups advocate violence is irrelevant to their revolutionary status, for the defining feature of revolutions is the degree and scope of change involved, not the way in which change is achieved. This basic point has been obscured by the disproportionate attention paid to cases featuring violent, sudden overthrows of the existing order, such as those of France, Russia, and China. Revolutionary transformations can occur without violence or sudden upheaval, with the ascendancies of Hitler and Mussolini being cases in point.
- 5 Some skeptics argue that it is inappropriate to apply the revolutions literature to situations where revolutions have not (yet) occurred. It is worth noting that in this case such concerns would apply a fortiori to the democratic transitions literature as well.
- 6 Bayat 1998; Wickham 2002; Abdo 2000.
- 7 Goldstone 1980; Goldstone 2001; Eckstein 1965; Feierabend et al. 1972; Gurr 1970; Gurr 1973; Johnson 1966.
- 8 Skocpol 1994, 111.
- 9 Tilly 1986, 49.
- 10 Skocpol 1979, 16.
- 11 Skocpol 1994, 260. See Trotsky 1980.
- 12 Skocpol 1994, 18.
- 13 This insight has also been emphasized by scholars working on less dramatic instances of political change. For

- example, the literature on social movements focuses on “changing opportunity structures,” which incorporate (but are not limited to) changes in the power and policies of existing state and political institutions. McAdam et al. 1996. Wickham 2002, for example, makes use of the social movements literature in her examination of the rise of Islamism in Egypt, which leads her to stress somewhat different factors and dynamics than does analysis presented here.
- 14 Skocpol 1979, 16.
  - 15 Skocpol 1994, 107.
  - 16 Ibid., 7–8.
  - 17 Skocpol 1979, 23; Dunn 1989. It is worth noting that Skocpol herself attempted to apply this framework to the most important case hitherto of successful Islamic revolution: Iran. Skocpol 1982.
  - 18 Huntington 1968, 265; Goldstone 1986.
  - 19 The critical and innovative aspect of this analysis is not its focus on the social and political changes associated with modernization, but its insistence that these changes become potentially destabilizing only insofar as political institutions and structures lack the capacity and flexibility to deal with them. As Charles Tilly has noted, Huntington’s theory is made “the more plausible because it appears to dispose of the anomaly that by many standards the relatively peaceful richer countries are also the faster changing.” Tilly 1986, 49.
  - 20 Goldstone 1991a; Goldstone 1991b; Goldstone 1986; Goldstone 1999.
  - 21 Goldstone 1991a, 24. See also Foran 1995, 114. Note that for Goldstone it is not population growth itself that matters, but the ability of existing institutions to deal with it. As with Huntington, the crucial variables are the nature and capacities of existing institutions: the weaker and less flexible they are, the less they can deal with the challenges posed by population growth, and the greater the potential for breakdown.
  - 22 For example, it is certainly at least possible to imagine a situation where a severely weakened state exists but no single, coherent revolutionary movement is able to mount a credible challenge. (This description probably fits the situation in many countries in the years before revolutions occur. A good historical example would be several cases in post–World War I Europe, where the revolutions expected to follow on the heels of the Russian Revolution and the end of the First World War never materialized.) Or, as has happened all too frequently, states can collapse without a coherent revolutionary movement having emerged, leading to chaos and warlordism, rather than a new political order. This latter outcome is much more likely, however, in premodern rather than in transitional societies.
  - 23 Goldstone 1994; Bayat 1998.
  - 24 Goldstone 1991b; Skocpol 1994; Popkin 1979; Wickham-Crowley 1987; Sewell 1980; Sewell 1985; Skocpol 1985.
  - 25 However, see Singerman 1995 and n.d. for an analysis of the role played by familial ties and networks on Egyptian civil society.
  - 26 Eberly 2000. Some have tried to narrow this definition by excluding organizations and associations with explicitly antidemocratic or antiliberal views. The problem with this is that it injects a great deal of subjective judgment into what is ostensibly an objectively defined phenomenon, and it makes arguments about the benign effects of civil society tautological.
 

Indeed, some scholars of the Middle East have engaged in precisely this type of reasoning, excluding Islamist groups from their definition of civil society (thereby robbing the sector of its largest and most vital element) and then proclaiming that the weakness of civil society is a main reason for the lack of democracy in the region. Schwedler 1995.
  - 27 Hall 1995, 1.
  - 28 Seligman 1992, x.
  - 29 Putnam 1993, 11. See also Bellah et al. 1985; Tocqueville 1969.
  - 30 The literature claiming to link civil society to myriad positive outcomes is huge. Some good surveys include Diamond 1994; Edwards et al. 2001.
  - 31 Norton 1993, 211. See also Kubba 2000; Sadowski 1993; Krämer 1992 and 1993; Esposito et al. 1999; Ghabra 1991; Sivan 1990b.
  - 32 Both the Ford Foundation and the Social Science Research Council, for example, sponsored initiatives on “Civil Society in the Middle East.” The most comprehensive survey of the topic was produced by Norton 1995 and 1996, and summarized in Schwedler 1995. For an overly critical view of this research program, see Kramer 2001.
  - 33 Berman 1997.
  - 34 Wickham 1994; Wickham 2002; Abdo 2000; Bayat 1998; Zaki 1995.
  - 35 Sivan 1990b, 353.
  - 36 Sivan 1998, 9–10.
  - 37 Ayubi 1980, 489.
  - 38 Cordesman 1998 and 1999; United Nations Development Programme 2002.
  - 39 Ibrahim 1996, 125.
  - 40 It should be noted that progress has been made on this front in the last several years.
  - 41 The rate for the developed world is 20 percent; for the developing world in general, 35 percent. A generally accepted estimate identifies 25 percent as a sustainable number for the long term and views anything over 35 percent as “high risk.”
  - 42 Wickham 2002, 11–2; see also chapter 3 and Kepel 1985.
  - 43 Wickham, 2002.
  - 44 There was some economic liberalization (the *intifāh*), as well as occasional relaxations on political controls. But the former came nowhere close to solving the country’s

- economic problems, and the latter were never allowed to develop far enough to significantly threaten the regime.
- 45 Ajami 1995, 79.
  - 46 Norton n.d.; Ibrahim 1996; Zaki 1995; Wickham 2002.
  - 47 Bayat 1998; Wickham 2002; Zaki 1995. It is also important to note that other potential challengers, such as secular nationalism and socialism, had already been tried in Egypt and found wanting, so they were not available as the foundation upon which a new revolutionary movement could be built.
  - 48 Karawan 1997, 21.
  - 49 Anderson 1997, 24.
  - 50 Lester 1999. See also Ibrahim 1988.
  - 51 Murphy 2002, 35.
  - 52 Wickham 2002, 102.
  - 53 Sivan 1990b, 359.
  - 54 Denoex 1993.
  - 55 Kepel 2002, 82.
  - 56 Ibid., 81–2.
  - 57 Denoex 1993, 151. See also Kepel 2002, chapter 12.
  - 58 Wickham 2002; Ibrahim 1995; Ibrahim 1996.
  - 59 Wickham 1997, 123.
  - 60 Esposito 1999, 100–1. See also Zubaida 1992 and Wickham 2002.
  - 61 Kifner 1986, A2.
  - 62 Esposito et al. 1997, 9.
  - 63 Wickham 1997, 125.
  - 64 Al-Sayyid 1995, 289. See also Dekmejian 1995; Denoex 1993.
  - 65 Wickham 2002, 120. See also Denoex 1993; Ibrahim 1980.
  - 66 Wickham 2002; Esposito 1999.
  - 67 Amani Qandil, quoted in Negus 1997.
  - 68 Ajami 1998, 203. See also Flores 1993; Aybui 1982; Dessouki 1981; Sadowski 1987.
  - 69 Zaki 1995, 241.
  - 70 Ibid. See also Ajami 1998, 203; Kepel 2002, chapter 12.
  - 71 Kepel 1985, 19.
  - 72 Zaki 1995. See also Alterman 2000.
  - 73 Zaki 1995, 119.
  - 74 Ibid., 127.
  - 75 Sivan 2000; Kepel 1985.
  - 76 Sivan 1997, 106. See also Sivan 1990a, chapter 4; Dekmejian 1995.
  - 77 Abdo 2000, 14. See also Bayat 1998; Murphy 2002.
  - 78 Bayat 1998, 156.
  - 79 Ayubi 1980, 487–8.
  - 80 Abdo 2000, 4.
  - 81 Sivan 1998.
  - 82 Sivan 1998; Sivan 1990a.
  - 83 Lester 1999, 1. See also Zaki 1995.
  - 84 Abdo 2000, 5–6, 25–6.
  - 85 Abdo 2000, 165.
  - 86 Murphy 2002, 200–11.
  - 87 Dekmejian 1995, 123.
  - 88 Rodenbeck 1998, 185.
  - 89 Abdo 2000, 12. See chapter 8 of the same book for a comparison of trends in Egypt and Iran.
  - 90 On this general pattern, see Norton 1993; Maddy-Weitzman 1996; Khashan 1997; Sivan 1990b; Ibrahim 1995; Ibrahim 1993; Dekmejian 1995; Anderson 1997.
  - 91 Esposito 1999; Entelis 1995; Kepel 2002, chapter 7; Maddy-Weitzman 1996.
  - 92 Esposito 1999, 176.
  - 93 Ibid., 174.
  - 94 Davis 1992, 11.
  - 95 Esposito 1999, 182.
  - 96 Trofimov 2001, 1. See also MacFarquhar 2001.
  - 97 Esposito 1999, 156. See also Norton n.d.; Trofimov 2001; MacFarquhar 2001.
  - 98 Abdo 2000; Wickham 2002; Weaver 1999. Goldstone's most recent work on revolutions, which focuses on efforts to undermine the existing institutions of the state, coincides with the view of Islamist movements presented in this paper. See Goldstone 1994; Goldstone 1999; Goldstone 2001.
  - 99 Zakaria 2001, 30. Although there has been some economic liberalization in Egypt, it has not been nearly enough to tackle the country's continuing major problems.
  - 100 Goodwin 2001.
  - 101 Murphy 2002, 20, quoting attorney Ahmed Saraf Al Din.
  - 102 On a similar point, see Gause 2000 and Goldfrank 1994. This is in some ways the flipside of the well-known argument about how resource extraction has helped keep authoritarianism in place in the Middle East. See, for example, Anderson 1995.
  - 103 Violent Islamists have also undermined support for the movement more generally by engaging in widespread and indiscriminate slaughter. In both Egypt and Algeria, particularly horrific massacres alienated many people otherwise sympathetic to the cause.
  - 104 Bayat 1998 interestingly refers to this phenomenon as a "passive revolution." See also Wickham 2002; Abdo 2000.
  - 105 Abdo 2000, 5.
  - 106 Abdo 2000, 199. See also Bayat 1998.
  - 107 This view is held by some of the most perceptive and influential observers of Islamism—e.g., Roy 1994 and Kepel 2002. Such scholars also see Islamism as a failure because it has not come up with distinctive and well-defined political and economic programs for usurping the state's power. However, these criticisms not only pay insufficient attention to the immense societal and cultural changes that Islamist movements have succeeded in effecting; they are also based upon invalid assumptions about how well developed the political and economic plans of revolutionary movements need to be. Almost all revolutionary movements rise to power more on the basis of their critique of the existing order than on their concrete plans for the future, and almost all spend their first years in power experimenting with a variety of

policies and institutional arrangements. Once this fact is recognized, Islamists today appear no different from the Russian or Chinese communists or the Nazis on the eve of their ascendancy to power.

- 108 Berman 1997. Research on other extremist movements also reveals that many have been supported by a vibrant associational infrastructure. See Riley n.d.; Gusfield 1962; Halebsky 1976; Parkin 1968; Wolfinger et al. 1964.
- 109 Berman 1997.
- 110 Rieff 1999.
- 111 Carothers and Ottaway 2000, 3.
- 112 Not necessarily by unwittingly funding revolutionary movements, but by further undermining support for the state as well as vitiating the state's own need to provide basic services for its own citizens.
- 113 Huntington 1968.