

Arab States vs. Islamists:

Past Record, Future Prospects

Jul 23, 2001



Brief Analysis

The record of prediction about Islamism as a political force has been unimpressive. The failure is due to inadequacies in conceptualizing what is known, more than any shortage of raw data.

What Is to Be Analyzed?

Islamist movements differ from Islamic movements as much as Arabists differ from Arabs. Islamists are not only Muslims; they also have a political and ideological platform to restructure the state, society and culture. In the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution there was an expectation of a wave of Islamization of states and societies. In fact, in the twenty years since the Iranian Revolution, there has been one case of political Islamism -- in Sudan -- and that came through a military coup, not through a popular uprising. The outcome was an absolute mess: horrendous economic conditions and a protracted, costly civil war that preceded the takeover by the Islamists. The Sudanese system cannot be exported because there are no importers.

Outside the Arab world there are the cases of Afghanistan and Iran. When Arab regimes want to scare their educated publics about Islamism, they show TV clips on Afghanistan under the Islamist regime. As regards Iran, the linguistic and cultural differences have acted as barriers against large-scale impact on the Arab world.

The current wave of Islamism in the Arab world has been blocked for the following reasons:

- Assassination of the leader only results in another taking his place to maintain the system and to unleash a major wave of repression against Islamists. The success in assassinating Sadat was a failure in changing the regime.
- Military coups have "withered away" in the Arab world: the army has become too large for coup-making, and the regimes have developed presidential guards, parallel parliamentary formations, and sophisticated intelligence agencies that make a military coup virtually impossible.
- Parliamentary operations are hard to carry out when the system managers control the rules of the game, for instance, by allowing restricted political pluralism under rules that facilitate certain outcomes.
- A popular uprising is extremely exceptional; it can require major political, socio-economic crisis coupled with a serious division in the ranks of the core ruling elites. The regimes ruthlessly repress such uprisings.
- Islamizing the society from below looks attractive given the growing Islamic socio-cultural influences in Arab societies, but the problem is how to convert socio-cultural sentiments into political relations of power.

In short, Arab states have proven to be much more resilient than they were thought to be. The Islamist pseudo-wave itself has not died, but become too weak to destabilize let alone bring down Arab regimes.

What Is to Be Contained?

Support for Islamism remains, particularly as the fear of globalization continues to prevail in Arab societies. But instead of bringing down regimes, Islamist groups may be wielding influence that constrains certain aspects of Arab

states' domestic and foreign policy, such as the status of women or the scope of any normalization with Israel. The multiple phenomena known as Islamism will not disappear in the foreseeable future. Ruthless repression will not make it vanish either. The notion of Islamist decline that will inevitably lead to disappearance does not make much sense.

> Arab regimes separate Islamist groups into two branches, the militants and the incrementalists. The state wants to contain both groupings, but utilizes different methods to do so.

Militants have a sense of urgency and a dedication to radical action. They believe that the state will not respond to appeals, petitions, or peaceful marches. The state has to be eradicated through an insurrection directed by a vanguard and the society has to be re-educated. Militant groups aim to undermine the main foundations of the state, including destroying the state's economic and financial system. They want to provoke rulers to overreact and launch emergency laws and conduct mass arrests in the hope that the public, out of resentment, will turn to militancy. This strategy did not succeed, because the state capitalized on the groups' lack of tolerance and inability to engage in sustained coalitions. When the threat of militants reached serious proportions, it was met by the state through massive retaliation. The regimes have learned from the case of Iran, in late 1978, that the worst kind of repression is a mild and ambivalent one, because it threatens its opponents and provokes them without undermining their ability to strike back. States have also learned that it is useful to publicize the actions of the militants, such as the killing of innocent people and the negative economic impact of these actions on the public. So, instead of faulting the state for economic deterioration, the public has blamed the militants.

The incrementalists have come to believe in the futility of starting with violent struggle, which some of them tried and found to be selfdefeating. They want to establish an Islamic state, but their experience suggests that starting with a frontal attack on the state is not prudent. They want to create a level of support for themselves on the ground that regimes cannot afford to ignore. In Jordan and Kuwait, they try to avoid de-legitimizing the regime as a whole. They refer to militant Islamists as misguided enthusiasts. The incrementalists use constructive ambiguity, broad statements, and demands with few concrete programs to avoid splitting their constituencies. They establish socio-economic institutions to gain support. They participate whenever possible in elections, student organizations, and professional associations. They are prepared to bide their time as necessary, convinced that time is on their side. Regime strategies in response vary, but center on containment, e.g., strict rules for elections and for the content of publications. Regimes like Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Morocco repeatedly emphasize their religious credentials. Some regimes use Islamic symbolism, e.g., Saddam Hussein added the words "Allah Akbar" to the Iraqi flag. Yet another strategy is to emphasize the record of Islamism in power in Afghanistan, Sudan and Iran, pointing out that while Islamists talk about toleration of civil society and political pluralism, the record of Islamism in power is the exclusion of non-Islamists from participation in politics.

What is to be Done?

State strategies have worked in crushing the militants and containing the incrementalists, but at an extremely high cost in terms of economic development, human rights and human lives. The option of doing nothing other than what has been done is not promising. An alternative approach is to first start with socio-economic change, to deal with the challenge of the unemployed educated youth in the urban centers. They tend to be more politicized, more indignant, more aware of the widening social gaps and more conscious of the corruption near the top of the pyramid of power.

Few Arab states have the option of what could be called instant democratization, inclusion, pluralism and accountability. More countries could implement a degree of political opening, which is not sweeping or instantaneous. Such opening up of the system would give other political forces the opportunity to participate and engage incrementalists in political debates. But it would require a reduction the state power, in particular, scaling back the security branch.

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations](#)

Feb 15, 2022

Grant Rumley

(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022

Anna Borshchevskaya

(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022

Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)

TOPICS

Arab & Islamic Politics (/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics)