



Beyond Islamists & Autocrats

INTRODUCTION TO THE SERIES

■ David Schenker

In late 2010 and early 2011, the Middle East was rocked by revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and Syria, and by popular protests in a number of other countries. The so-called Arab Spring signaled the end of three Arab authoritarian regimes, and appeared to promise improvements in governance, if not democratic development, in these states and throughout the region. Quickly, though, cautious optimism shifted to concern—not only about the return of traditional secular Arab nationalist dictators but also about the potential for a new Islamist-leaning regional authoritarianism.

By 2013, Islamist governments had come to power in Egypt and Tunisia, Islamist militias had taken hold in a Libya liberated from Muammar Qadhafi's rule, and the secular Syrian revolt had morphed into a rebellion led by the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) and al-Qaeda. The "spring," from the perspective of both Washington and the Middle East, was starting to feel more like a long winter with little prospect for a positive outcome. While many Arabs signaled their clear opposition to collective sharia-based government, political Islam was ascendant and, many believed, irreversible.

Four years on, the Middle East is aflame, but the Arab states have not fallen like dominoes to the Islamists. In Egypt, a Muslim Brotherhood electoral victory was re-

versed by a military coup; in Tunisia, a democratically elected but widely unpopular Islamist-led coalition ceded power to a more secular coalition government. Elsewhere in the region, non-Islamists—individuals, NGOs, and political parties—are also contesting the concept of religiously inspired government. Yet ISIS and other Islamic extremists remain quite powerful in some places, while traditional autocrats claiming various shades of religious legitimacy continue to rule in others.

To be sure, few of the non-Islamists are secular, either in the sense of eschewing religion or in supporting a separation of mosque and state. Many adherents or sympathizers are personally religious, and many support some role for religious values in public life. Nor are these non-Islamists all liberals: they comprise traditional elitists, ardent nationalists, leftists, and even varying degrees of constitutional monarchists. But what does unite this group is its rhetorical emphasis on pluralism, religious tolerance, and individual freedoms, and its opposition to Islamist political programs that have promoted exclusivist, intolerant, and sharia-based agendas.

Judging from contemporary Washington discourse, one might gather that the current Arab context represents a contest solely between religious fundamentalism and authoritarianism, some military, some monarchical. But the reality is more complex: between these two extremes, there are authentic popular Arab forces calling for more representative government and greater individual freedoms. Those forces, encompassed within the non-Islamist camp, are central to determining the future

character of the Middle East. Despite the many deficits of the region's non-Islamist political actors, the United States has an abiding interest in seeing them prevail.

To date, much has been written about the headline cases of Egypt and Tunisia, but modest opportunities to move toward greater pluralism, more-representative government, and increased respect for universal human values can be found elsewhere in the region as well. In a sense, Islamists' poor governance record and declining popularity in some quarters have created an opening for non-Islamist alternatives.

Voting data confirms this opening. To cite two examples, liberal, socialist/populist, and even avowedly secular parties won a combined majority of seats in Tunisia's 2011 Constituent Assembly elections, and non-Islamist candidates won 57 percent of the vote in the first round of Egypt's 2012 presidential elections. In many other Arab countries, from Morocco to Libya all the way to Iraq and Kuwait, non-Islamist parties or candidates have tended to outpoll their rivals.

No doubt, ample reason exists for caution about the prospects for the region's non-Islamist political forces. Many of these groups are poorly organized, plagued by infighting, lack a coherent message, and have been targeted by oppressive regimes and Islamists alike. Truth be told, the platforms of some of these groups—whether statist, socialist, former regime elements, or otherwise—are in important respects not consistent with U.S. values, although their opinions are light-years closer to U.S. values than those of the religious fanatics. Thus far, with the possible exception of Tunisia, these parties have been unable to translate Islamist failures into lasting electoral or policy victories. At the most basic level, non-Islamist parties still lack the Islamists' deep social-service networks and the resources to match their outreach to the broader population. Nonetheless, the current regional backlash against extremists and Islamist political overreach constitutes a window of opportunity for these groups.

Although the potential of non-Islamist political actors should not be exaggerated, the group is critical if Middle East states are to progress toward pluralistic, tolerant systems of governance. As such, the Washington

Institute for Near East Policy has determined that surveying the ideas, organizational capacity, and domestic and foreign support of these actors would be a productive exercise. A series of scholarly papers, to be published over the next eighteen months, will thus present differing levels of optimism about prospects for the region's non-Islamist, nondictatorial forces. Most contributors, unsurprisingly, are not nearly as hopeful as the *Washington Post's* Jackson Diehl, who wrote on April 27, 2015:

That one country, Tunisia, has succeeded in establishing a working democracy, despite power struggles between secularists and Islamists, and terrorism by jihadists, shows that the goal of democratic transformation was neither a pipe dream nor a Western imposition unsuited for Arab lands.

What the articles will offer are sober assessments of non-Islamist and democratically and pluralistically inclined actors in a dozen or so Middle East states. The analysis focuses on the particular conditions in each country, detailing the goals, strengths, and weaknesses of the groups in question, and exploring their approach in the contest with their Islamist rivals.

Only in recent months have voices in Washington begun to recognize the promise, however limited, of non-Islamist actors, as opposed to focusing solely on the authoritarian-versus-Islamist narrative. The prevailing assumption in Washington over the past four years has been, on the one hand, that Islamists somehow represent the authentic voice of the people and that the non-Islamist opponents are out of touch with the masses. On the other hand, the United States has undermined these actors by pushing too early for national elections, unnecessarily risking empowering a new set of authoritarians.

The Washington Institute's series on non-Islamist, pluralistically inclined political actors aims to shed light on this trend, and provide suggestions for Washington on how best to cultivate and preserve this limited resource. At this critical time of transition, and after decades and millions of U.S. dollars spent on democratization projects, one would have hoped the Middle East would be populated with more liberal democrats. Alas, in the bat-

tle of ideas—and electoral politics—that group in most Arab countries is small. But, for all the differences Americans may have with the larger group of pluralistically inclined Arab non-Islamists, these actors merit U.S. support. They are beginning the political contest with both

the Islamists and the authoritarians with a serious, but perhaps not insurmountable, deficit. As with the developments in Tunisia, U.S. interests would be best served if these non-Islamists elsewhere in the Middle East at least hold their own.

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