Islamist Terrorism and the Democratic Deficit in the Middle East

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Abstract

Subsequent to 9/11 the conclusion was drawn that the prevalence of authoritarianism in the Middle East undermined Western interests by contributing to the emergence of Islamist terrorism. This paper argues that there is no evidence that a causal relationship exists between the democratic deficit in the Middle East and the emergence of Islamist terrorism.

The paper explores the three main types of Islamist terrorism: the transnational terrorism of al Qaeda; the Islamist terrorism associated with national liberation movements such as Hamas and Hizbullah; and Islamist terrorism in the context of domestic insurgencies such as the Egyptian Gamaat Islamiya and the Algerian GIA. The case studies show that the Islamist movements’ lack of political participation and repression contributed to radicalisation in some cases, but not in others.

The paper also explores the obverse argument, whether political participation leads to the emergence of non-violent Islamism. The Turkish Justice and Development Party, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, the Tunisian Nahda and the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood/Islamic Action Front are studied in this context. The evidence, again, is mixed: the moderation of some movements is clearly linked to their being included in the political process, but in other cases repression had the same outcome.
Introduction

Authoritarian politics in the Middle East, and in particular in the Arab countries, have remained largely impervious to the ‘waves’ of democratisation that have engulfed other world regions since the 1970s. In recent decades, the Middle East has also witnessed the emergence of radical religious political movements, sometimes of a violent kind. By arguing that democratisation would enable Islamist movements to overturn ‘moderate’ regimes and ultimately abolish democracy itself (the ‘Algeria scenario’), these movements have been used by incumbent governments to justify the continuation of repressive policies. Such arguments were tacitly accepted by Western states which feared that radical Islamists, upon assuming power, would also turn against their interests.

Following the attacks of 11 September 2001, however, the view appears to have prevailed among policy makers in the West that support for authoritarian if ‘moderate’ regimes in the Middle East had damaged the West’s interests. In particular, the association between the United States and repressive Arab leaderships made it into a target of Islamist wrath. Regimes that were deemed friendly to the United States, such as the Saudi and Egyptian ones, played a crucial role in the rise of al Qaeda by encouraging virulent anti-American rhetoric in place of dissent and by ‘exporting’ troublemakers to assure internal stability. On the basis of such arguments, the conclusion was quickly drawn that the democratic deficit in the Middle East had contributed to the emergence of Islamist terrorism.

US foreign policy was reconsidered on the basis of this conclusion. Both Secretary of State Colin Powell, in announcing the Middle East Partnership Initiative in December 2001, and President George W. Bush, in his ‘Remarks’ at the National Endowment for Democracy in November 2003, indicated that democratisation had become a priority for US policy in the Middle East. In June 2004, the Broader Middle East Partnership Initiative was announced at the G8 Conference in Atlanta, Georgia and there were also a number of proposals on democracy promotion on the part of European governments and the European Union. Supporters of the 2003 Iraq war argued that a democratic Iraq would benefit Western interests by unleashing a democratic transformation of the whole region. As the British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, stated in September 2004 in defending the British government’s decision to go to war: ‘It’s simply that I believe that democracy there [in Iraq] means security here’.

There have been dissenting voices against this newly-found policy consensus. Thomas Carothers, for instance, has criticised ‘the facile assumption that a straight line exists between progress on democratisation and the elimination of the roots of Islamic terrorism’ and has argued that the sources of Islamic radicalism cannot be reduced to the lack of democracy in the Arab world. He has also warned that the transition from dictatorship to democracy could be turbulent and that ‘more than a few established democracies have struggled with persistent terrorist threats’. Some commentators have questioned the link between democracy and stability and
the assertion that democracy will produce peaceful and prosperous regimes. Others point out that elections in the Middle East could return anti-Western Islamists to power leading to the fulfilment of the ‘Algeria scenario’ in other parts of the region.

The terms of the debate, as laid out above, are clear. However, although both sides of the argument make intuitive sense, they are more often than not stated rather than demonstrated or systematically proven. In fact, the detailed research exploring the alleged causal relationship between the democratic deficit in the Middle East and Islamist terrorism is lacking. Two exceptions are Mohammed Hafez’s *Why Muslims Rebel* and Jennifer Noyon’s *Islam, Politics and Pluralism.* Both studies argue for a connection between the absence of democratic politics and Islamist violence. Hafez accounts for Muslim rebellions on the grounds of institutional exclusion and reactive and indiscriminate repression. Noyon seeks to demonstrate that Islam and democracy are compatible and that democratic participation by Islamists has encouraged moderation. However (and partly in response to Hafez and Noyon) this paper shows that, although there is some evidence to support the causal link between the democratic deficit in the Middle East and Islamist terrorism, it is not conclusive – and that therefore the relationship remains unproven. I pursue my argument by investigating, through quantitative but mainly qualitative methods, whether exclusion from the political process and the experience of repression makes Islamist movements prone to violence and, conversely, whether political participation encourages them to pursue their Islamist objectives through peaceful means.

The question of democracy in the Middle East cannot, of course, be reduced to the political fate of Islamist opposition movements. It is related to wider issues pertaining to civil and political rights and the institutionalisation of political pluralism and participation. I do not, however, think it unreasonable to focus on Islamist movements’ political participation since the purpose of the paper is to examine how these movements, in particular, have been shaped by the wider political context in which they operate. Furthermore, given that Islamist parties often constitute the main opposition parties to existing regimes, their treatment is a good indicator of the degree of openness and political freedom in a state.

In the paper, I use a three-fold categorisation of Islamist terrorism: transnational Islamist terrorism; Islamist terrorism associated with national liberation movements; and Islamist domestic insurgencies against incumbent regimes. In my view, these are the three types of Islamist terrorism that have been most prominent in recent years. The categorisation implicitly challenges the description of Islamist terrorism as one movement with transnational connections, a hierarchy and uniform objectives. I define ‘terrorism’ as ‘a political act, ordinarily committed by an organised group, involving the death or the threat of death to non-combatants’.

Islamist terrorism/radicalism/militancy has been the subject of a lively academic and public policy debate and a number of explanations have been put forward to account for this intriguing phenomenon. They include
essentialist explanations pertaining to the nature of Islam; the pervasiveness of religious education and the influence of radical Islamist religious leaders (although this begs the question of extremism, given that religious education and thought could also foster non-violence); psychological explanations that account for Islamic militancy on the basis of rapid urbanisation, unemployment and social anomie; sociological explanations focusing on the transformation of religion from a 'lived' tradition into an objectified ideological programme; political explanations which describe violence as the chosen political or strategic instrument for overturning US or Western political or economic domination and righting perceived wrongs such as the Palestinian issue; economic explanations which describe Islamist terrorism as the outcome of economic underdevelopment, deprivation and poverty. My aim here is not to offer an answer to the question 'What are the causes of Islamist terrorism?' by tackling the merits and demerits of the explanations summarised above, but instead to isolate one possible explanation, the lack of democracy, and to see how it fares in light of the evidence.

**Democracy and Terrorism**

Placing the question of democracy and terrorism in the Middle East in broader historical and geographical perspective is an essential starting point for this study. As well as being instructive, it helps us move away from the exceptionalism which pervades much of the debate on Islamist terrorism. Studies on democracy and terrorism show that there is no simple causal relationship between the lack of democracy and the emergence of political violence anywhere in the world.

In discussing the causes of terrorism in general, Martha Crenshaw identifies as catalysts the lack of opportunity for political participation and government actions such as the use of unexpected or unusual force in response to protest or attempts at reform. She suggests, following Bonanate, that terrorism emerges in 'blocked' societies which are resistant to innovation. Extremist organisations sometimes believe that it is fear, generated by government repression, which prevents the people from lending support to their cause. However, Crenshaw does not argue that the lack of democracy leads to terrorism. Instead, she claims that terrorists perceive an absence of choice and reason that there is no alternative to violent action. Indeed, the persistence of terrorism in Western Europe throughout the 1970s, 1980s and beyond, in the form of the IRA, ETA, November 17, Rote Armee Fraktion (Red Army Faction), Red Brigades and others shows that the perception of absence of choice can exist even in mature democracies.

In a study of the links between terrorist groups and political parties, Leonard Weinberg argues that there is no evidence that repression, or the exclusion of political parties from the political process leads them to take up arms. He writes that he ‘has the impression but cannot prove that the more common experience has been for the terrorism-related parties to fare poorly at polls’. However, he offers the counter-example of the Tamil Tigers who were established in 1978 when their ‘sister’ political party, the Tamil United Liberation Front, was the single largest opposition party in parliament. In an
article co-authored with William Eubank, Weinberg shows, using a simple statistical analysis, that both victims and perpetrators of terrorist acts are more likely to be citizens of stable democratic countries (by comparison to ‘insecure’ and ‘partial’ democracies). In a separate study, David Rapoport and Weinberg highlight the extent to which elections, an inherent/central aspect of democracy, generate violent confrontations. Moreover, in answer to the question ‘Why is terrorism so common in free and democratic societies?’ Christopher Hewitt surveys the US political scene and concludes that ‘the resort to violence is most likely to take place when members of a group have their hopes and aspirations raised, but then become disillusioned with the political process.’ Finally, Walter Laqueur makes the straightforward claim that it is less easy for terrorist groups to perpetrate campaigns in authoritarian systems and that terrorism can only flourish in an environment that is at least partly democratic (or, alternatively, in a wholly inefficient dictatorship).

The above studies can be instructive in helping us fathom the causes of Islamist terrorism only if we view it as part and parcel of a global political phenomenon, and not as a religious or otherwise exceptional case. Olivier Roy’s fascinating study of Islamic radicals which argues that they are ‘often a mix of educated middle-class leaders and working-class dropouts, a pattern reminiscent of most West European radicals of the 1970s and 1980s (Red Army Faction in Germany, Red Brigades in Italy, Action Directe in France)’ seems to suggest that it is indeed plausible to view Islamist terrorism in the context of global terrorist trends.

The Quantitative Study

A statistical analysis of the relationship between democratic participation and terrorism in the Middle East provides interesting, albeit limited insights for the central question of this paper and offers a background to the case studies investigated below. The analysis is based on a dataset with annual observations for 20 countries from 1968 to 2003 (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman, Yemen, United Arab Emirates and Sudan). It brings together information from the Freedom House ‘Freedom in the World' Index for political rights and civil liberties; and the ITERATE dataset for international terrorist events.

The underlying understanding of democracy, or freedom, in the ‘Freedom in the World’ Index combines political rights – defined as those rights that enable people to participate freely in the political process – and civil liberties – including the freedom to develop opinions, institutions, and personal autonomy without interference from the state. Evaluated against 27 pre-defined questions, countries are then rated on a 1 to 7 scale for their political rights and civil liberties situation, respectively. The resulting status designation of ‘Free’ (1-2.5), ‘Partly Free’ (3-5.5), or ‘Not Free’ (5.5-7) represents the average of these two numerical ratings. Although not satisfactory on a number of counts, Freedom House is the only available
source of uninterrupted data for the Middle Eastern region as a whole over the last three decades.

A note about the methodology by which terrorist events are accounted for is also in order here. ITERATE, while providing a wealth of additional information on international / transnational terrorism (i.e. number of casualties, location, nationality of victims, etc.), does not distinguish between Islamist and other forms of terrorism (e.g. terrorist activities of Marxist and independence movements such as the Kurdish PKK in Turkey). Equally, ITERATE focuses exclusively on international or transnational terrorism, that is terrorist acts whose “ramifications transcend national boundaries”, and disregards forms of terrorism with an exclusively domestic intent and purpose.

The quantitative study has yielded two interesting results.

Figure 1: Regional Distribution of Terrorist Incidents 1968-2002

Figure 1 shows the distribution of terrorist incidents according to world regions. Terrorist acts in the Middle East and North Africa contribute 21% to global terrorist activities over the period of 1968-2002. This share is exceeded by both Western Europe – arguably together with North America the most ‘democratic’ of all world regions – with 28% and Latin America and the Caribbean (22%).
Figure 2 plots the annual number of terrorist acts committed in the Middle East as reported by ITERATE (see left scale). These data exhibit no obvious temporal pattern and reveal considerable year-to-year variations in terrorist activities. However, we do witness an increase in terrorist activity within the region during the 1980s followed by a decline throughout the 1990s. Since 2001, the annual number of terrorist acts in the region seems – again – to be on the increase. These developments do not visibly correlate with the evolution of the average ‘freedom’ ratings for the region as provided by the ‘Freedom in the World Index’ (see right scale). Throughout the period under investigation, average ratings for the region have been on the lower end of the ‘Partly Free’ category with a gradual decline of ‘freedom’ in the 1980s and 1990s but slowly improving conditions in terms of political rights and civil liberties since 1998. If any, reduced political and civil freedom in the region seems to be correlated to rising annual number of terrorist acts in the 1980s. This trend, however, seems to be contradicted by the developments in the 1990s, where reductions in citizens’ political and civil liberties were accompanied by the reduction of terrorist activities. Similarly, growing numbers of terrorist incidents in the region since 1998 took place against the background of an improving regional political rights and civil liberties situation as reported by Freedom House.

Transnational Islamist Terrorism: Al Qaeda

The most spectacular form of Islamist violence in recent years - although not the most costly in terms of casualties – has been perpetrated by Islamist
terrorists operating across national boundaries. The most infamous of these organisations – if, indeed, we can call it that - is, of course, al Qaeda. Is the democratic deficit in the Middle East linked to its emergence?

In a simple and direct way this seems to be the case: The two leading figures of al Qaeda, Osama Bin Laden and Ayman al Zawahiri, are citizens of states ruled by repressive regimes, Saudi Arabia and Egypt respectively. Ayman al Zawahiri was one of the leaders of al Jihad (the Egyptian group which assassinated Sadat in 1981) and was instrumental in drawing the organisation into international activity by formally merging with al Qaeda in 1998. It has been argued that ‘Al-Zawahiri left Egypt because he had been tortured, humiliated; he hated the whole world after that. Al-Zawahiri was a product of a repressive system.’

Osama Bin Laden’s case is much more complex. His radicalisation was undoubtedly caused by his disillusionment with the Saudi regime (which he challenged, albeit not in violent ways, before turning to a ‘global’ confrontation against the United States in the mid-1990s). The lack of political pluralism and opportunity for participation in the Saudi political system; the unremitting repression of the regime; and its lack of accountability may have contributed to Bin Laden’s disillusionment in indirect ways. But he appeared to have been more critical of the Saudi regime for being ‘un-Islamic’ rather than being ‘undemocratic’ and, above all, for its permitting US troops to be stationed in Saudi territory after the Gulf War of 1991. Bin Laden’s concerns were similar to those of the wider Islamist opposition to the Saudi regime, of which he became a leader in the 1980s. Their demands, since the early 1990s, included greater political participation and respect for human rights. However, Islamists define human rights by the sharia (which is profoundly illiberal), and they also demand the strengthening of religious institutions over state and society.

The formative experiences of the al Qaeda ‘core’ element of a hundred or so individuals, including Bin Laden and Zawahiri, were in Afghanistan during the 1980s and 1990s. The ongoing ‘jihad’ against the Soviet Union and the continuing civil war after the USSR’s withdrawal in 1989 attracted a number of Arab volunteers looking for an Islamic ‘cause’. In the training camps in Afghanistan, these volunteers developed a ‘highly militaristic, violent worldview’. The veterans of Afghanistan, upon their return home, presented a real danger to most Arab states, one of the reasons being that ‘they were completely divorced from the social realities of the wider world around them, locked as they were into a sectarian religious logic.’ Herein lies a plausible explanation of al Qaeda violence. Rather than specific grievances and the experience of repression, it is the lack of its members’ participation in any political process which allows them to take extreme positions. The transnational nature of al Qaeda, the rootlessness of the individuals that comprise its core element, their lack of accountability to anyone but themselves for their actions and their ability to eschew the compromises that participation in local politics would entail, explain their choice of violent tactics – and are, in some ways, indeed connected to the undemocratic nature of Middle Eastern states.
Having said that, not all transnational Islamist organisations are violent. Some of them are apolitical and have exclusively cultural, educational or religious agendas. Other politically conservative but nonetheless non-violent examples of transnational organisations are Hizb al Tahrir and the Muslim Brotherhood. Hizb al Tahrir was established in 1953 by a Palestinian and then expanded throughout the Middle East and into several European countries. It is now particularly strong in Central Asia. Even though Hizb al Tahrir espouses radical views about recreating an Islamic state under a resurrected caliphate, it steadfastly proclaims its adherence to non-violence. The Muslim Brotherhood, in turn, was established in Egypt in 1928. It set up a branch in Syria in the 1940s and subsequently spread to other Arab states. Branches of the Brotherhood have been violent in periods of their history, and there are always suspicions that it abets violence rather than actively perpetrating it. However, over the last two to three decades, the Brotherhood has become synonymous with conservatism and moderation, a bulwark of the established ‘system’ rather than a challenge to it.

Islamist Terrorism and National Liberation: Hamas and Hizbullah

The second type of Islamist terrorism that the Middle East has spawned is associated with national liberation movements, and in particular with Hamas and Hizbullah, both of which have engaged in a war against Israel in the Palestinian and Lebanese contexts respectively. Unlike al Qaeda, Hamas and Hizbullah are complex social and political movements alongside being military and terrorist outfits. They are also different from al Qaeda in that their terrorist activity aims to liberate Palestine and (before 2000) Southern Lebanon respectively, as opposed to being part of a ‘global struggle’ with undefined objectives against the United States.

Hizbullah was established in 1985 as a militia of the Shia minority in Lebanon and became militarily engaged in the Lebanese civil war until its end in 1989-90. After the end of the war, partly as Iran’s and Syria’s proxy, it conducted a war against Israel’s occupation of South Lebanon until Israel’s withdrawal in 2000. But at the same time as being a military organisation, Hizbullah also played an increasingly important social and political role in Lebanon’s confessional politics. Its network of charities helped alleviate the poverty of the Shia community by providing critical health, education and municipal services. Since 1992, Hizbullah has also participated in Lebanon’s national elections as a political party. Its military success against Israel translated into Lebanon-wide support, and Hizbullah proved to be a cohesive and disciplined force in Parliament, arguably less prone to corruption than other parties.

Hizbullah’s participation in the Lebanese political process (deeply flawed and restricted though this process was) contributed to its transformation from a radical militia into a mainstream political party. As it became increasingly involved in Lebanese politics and even reached out beyond the boundaries of the Shia community, Hizbullah renounced the project of an Islamic state. The leadership moved away from insisting on the introduction of sharia law and
instead focused on social issues such as alcohol and the position of women. But, although there is no doubt that political participation contributed to moderating Hizbullah’s ideological position, it did not lead to the renunciation of violence. Throughout the 1990s, alongside the growing moderation in Hizbullah’s political discourse, terrorist violence (as part of broader military operations) continued to be employed in South Lebanon as well as Northern Israel. Clearly, the increasing moderation had an exclusive domestic political focus, whereas the continuing violence was directed towards an ‘outsider’, the perceived colonial power, Israel.

Since the withdrawal of Israel from South Lebanon in May 2000, Hizbullah has continued skirmishes over the disputed Sheba’a farms and has focused on securing the release of its members imprisoned by Israel. The outbreak of the second Palestinian intifada raised the possibility that Hizbullah’s operations against Israel would continue. From the start, one of Hizbullah’s stated goals had been the liberation of Palestine, and Lebanon was seen as only part of a much larger theatre of operations. But this strategy was more rhetoric than implemented in action, partly because of fear, in Syria as well as within Hizbullah itself, of Israeli and US retaliation.

Hizbullah’s terrorist activities in the 1980s included kidnappings against Westerners and suicide bombings against US and French as well as Israeli targets. In this sense, it was distinct from its violence in the 1990s which targeted Israeli civilians in Northern Israel but mostly concentrated on the Israeli army and its Lebanese proxies in South Lebanon. If we describe Hizbullah in the 1980s as battling ‘the West’ in general and accept the claim that, during that time, destroying Israel was a religious goal, it would be plausible to argue that political participation in the 1990s encouraged the movement to move away from this type of violence. But the fact remains that Hizbullah’s violent activities were unaffected by political participation in the short term and continued – albeit in a different form - until the objective of Israeli withdrawal was achieved.

Similar conclusions can be drawn by studying the Palestinian Hamas. Hamas split from the Muslim Brotherhood in 1988, the outcome of a revolt by a younger, more activist generation of leaders against the Brotherhood policy of avoiding confrontation with Israel and gradual Islamisation. This split took place against the background of the outbreak of the Palestinian Intifada in 1987, which provided the impetus for the creation of Hamas. While, contrary to its own claims, Hamas did not generate the Intifada, it did indeed benefit most from it, especially in terms of gaining popular appeal. Therefore the birth of Hamas came at a moment of civil unrest, indeed popular revolt, and was unrelated to the lack of democracy or political participation – that is, unless we understand occupation as a suspension of the political process altogether. Until the Declaration of Principles in 1993 initiated the Oslo peace process, no self-rule mechanisms were in place in the Occupied West Bank and Gaza. It is therefore not entirely surprising to expect that this situation would lead to the emergence of a violent (liberation) movement targeting the occupying power.
However, even though Hamas has employed terrorist violence such as shootings, firebombings and stabbings, as well as the killings of alleged collaborators since its inception, the group raised its level of operations with the adoption of a campaign of suicide bombings (inspired by Hizbullah) after the Declaration of Principles. Clearly, Oslo’s promise of political participation did not prevent Hamas from employing terrorist violence. Hamas declined to participate in the first legislative and presidential elections in Palestine in January 1996 because it saw them as a legitimisation of Oslo. However, there was apparently a split in Hamas thinking about this which is illustrated by the fact that the National Islamic Salvation Party, which had been supported in its formation by Hamas, did participate in the elections. The possibility has also been suggested that, at the end of 1995, Arafat came close to securing Hamas’s participation. Therefore, the violence that intensified in the first few months after the elections was not a result of Hamas’s exclusion, given that it was voluntary. Neither can we see any connection between repression and terrorism. Indeed, the crackdown against Hamas by the Palestinian Authority (PA) was a reaction to Hamas’s intensified campaign, not the other way around.

Similarly to Hizbullah, Hamas is a social and political movement as well as a terrorist organisation. Oslo ushered in a period of limited self-government which, although flawed and constrained by the PA’s authoritarianism and corruption, encouraged democratic practices. Although it boycotted the 1996 elections, Hamas has participated in annual elections for student and professional unions. Partly as a result of this socialisation and political participation, Hamas has gradually dropped its absolutist demands for an Islamic state, has accept the need for power-sharing and ideological compromise, and has formed alliances with its erstwhile leftist enemies and feminist groups. However, although this evolution demonstrates that the movement has a pragmatic streak which may make it amenable to compromise with Israel, it has not led to the abandonment of its terrorist violence against Israel. As can be seen even more clearly in the second intifada since 2000, Hamas’s terrorist activity is determined by the vicissitudes of the peace process – or lack thereof - and its competitive relations with the PA. Similarly to the case of Hizbullah discussed above, political participation can explain the shift of Hamas towards greater moderation in its social and political positions but has not affected its terrorist stance against the ‘outsider’, Israel.

**Terrorism and Domestic Islamist Insurgencies: the Armed Islamic Group and the Gamaat Islamiya**

The third type of Islamist terrorism in the Middle East has emerged in the context of domestic insurgencies against established governments. A number of such insurgencies occurred in the 1980s and 1990s but the Algerian and Egyptian cases are particularly well-suited for investigating the relationship between democracy and terrorism. In Algeria, the causal link between the political exclusion and repression of the Islamist movement and its adoption of terrorist tactics is especially clear. The Islamic Action Front (FIS) rose rapidly as a result of the ‘opening up’ of the political system in the late 1980s. The
quick pace of democratisation, in the context of the Algerian regime’s severe
de-legitimation, spawned a conservative albeit non-violent movement. When it
became apparent in January 1992 that the FIS was on the verge of winning
the national elections, the army staged a coup to overturn the electoral
process. The FIS was banned and its members were subjected to widespread
imprisonment, torture, disappearances and killings. The political exclusion and
indiscriminate repression of the FIS led some of its members to join radical
Islamist groups which rejected democracy, the electoral process and the
Algerian ruling regime altogether. By 1993, the Armed Islamic Group (GIA)
had become the most prominent of these radical groups. As it became clear
that the FIS would not give up its demand to return to the electoral process,
the GIA completely broke relations with the more moderate movement and an
all-out civil war between the Islamist radicals and the Algerian state ensued.

The pre-requisites for the radicalisation of Algerian Islamism may have
existed well before 1992 but the political exclusion and repression of the FIS
was not only the catalyst but also its cause. This is convincingly demonstrated
by Mohammed Hafez who, in a detailed study, traces how repression by the
Algerian state created ‘a political environment of bifurcation and brutality’. The
radical Islamists were forced to abandon the inclusive organisation of the FIS
and to create hundreds of cells in order to protect themselves from informants
and infiltration. The creation of these exclusive mobilisation structures caused
them to gradually lose touch with reality and to begin to view their goals in
emotive rather than strategic terms. The result was an orgy of violence in
which civilians were trapped between the GIA’s refusal to countenance that
anyone was neutral in the conflict and the harsh measures, and possible
complicity in the massacres, by the Algerian army. 43

Hafez applies the same approach to the causes of the Islamist insurgency in
Egypt in the 1990s. The escalation of Islamist violence there was the outcome
of the regime’s de-liberalisation in the early part of the decade in response to
the growing popularity of the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1980s. The
government’s manipulation of the electoral law led to the Brotherhood’s
boycott of the 1990 elections. On the eve of the 1995 elections, the most
fraudulent in Egypt’s recent history, a large number of its leadership was put
behind bars. Hafez argues that the Gamaat Islamiya’s insurgency (which
included violence against Copts, state officials and foreign tourists) was a
response to the Islamists’ exclusion from the political contest and that
violence spiralled as a result of the indiscriminate and heavy-handed state
repression that followed it. 44 Other observers of the Egyptian political scene
concur with this analysis. In a study of the Islamist rebellion in Upper Egypt,
James Toth argues that Islamists who ‘otherwise desired just to lead a
righteous life and practice their faith in a more devout and concrete way’ did
not have a pre-planned strategy for committing violence but were forced to a
militant position by a government campaign of harassment, arrests, torture
and humiliation in police custody. 45 Mustapha Kamel Al-Sayyid also argues
that the security forces, not aggression by the Gamaat Islamiya, were
responsible for the clashes which began in 1987-88 and escalated 1992-7. 46
However, by contrast to the Algerian case, the argument that the Islamist insurgency in Egypt was a response to political exclusion and state repression is not entirely convincing. A closer examination of the evidence shows that the Gamaat Islamiya’s radicalisation was not a response to the exclusion of the Muslim Brotherhood from the political process. In fact, the Gamaat Islamiya had traditionally shunned parliamentary participation and had condemned the Brotherhood for going down that route ever since the 1970s when it became evident that the Brotherhood had chosen to accommodate the regime and work within a system that the radicals considered impious. Thus, the radical Islamists were not driven to militancy when the Brothers were excluded from electoral participation in the 1990s but instead felt vindicated by it.

Islamist violence in Egypt may have intensified in the 1990s but can be traced back to the late 1970s when it first occurred in response to Sadat’s peace with Israel. Its varying levels of intensity cannot be correlated with the openness or restriction of political space. For example, in 1987 both Gamaat Islamiyya and Islamic Jihad escalated their violent activities. The year was marred by assassination attempts against a former minister of the interior, a group of American diplomats and attacks against the Copts in Upper Egypt. However, 1987 was also the year when the Muslim Brothers achieved their most impressive electoral successes with nearly fifty-eight candidates of the Islamic Alliance, including thirty-five Muslim Brothers, gaining parliamentary seats. More generally, during the 1980s the Egyptian government tolerated the activities of the Brotherhood and allowed it to expand its influence in the professions and through Islamic banks and investment funds.

If political exclusion of the moderates does not provide the key to understanding the Islamist insurgency in Egypt in the 1990s, what about state repression? The problem here is that it is not entirely clear that the violence was initiated by the Egyptian regime. By contrast to the analysts cited above, Gilles Kepel argues that it was the continued violence against the Copts and the Gamaat Islamiya’s growing strength that triggered repression on the part of the government, which in turn led to the uprising. His account of events is that in 1993-97 the regime opted for head-on confrontation after the Gamaat had thrown down the gauntlet. Kepel also implies that the government’s decision to stop courting the Brotherhood and exclude the Brothers from political participation had not predated the radical uprising but was a consequence of it.

The Emergence of Non-Violent Islamism

If lack of democracy leads to terrorism, the obverse must also hold: democratic participation – or, in the context of this analysis, any political participation - must encourage a movement to abandon violence as a means of achieving political ends. Once again, however, the evidence from the Middle East does not demonstrate a clear causal link between political participation and non-violence. Although some non-violent Islamist movements are products of political participation, others have emerged in conditions of political exclusion and repression. The following case studies illustrate this diversity of experiences.
The Muslim Brotherhood of Jordan is exceptional in the Middle East in that it has had legal status, albeit as a charitable organisation, since 1945. The Hashemite monarchy enjoyed a measure of religious legitimation and this allowed King Hussein to offer the Muslim Brothers a role in education and social affairs. In exchange they never transgressed the boundaries of ‘loyal opposition’. The Brotherhood supported the monarchy against Arab nationalism and the appeal of radical Islamism. It played a role in the (fitful) democratisation of Jordanian politics after 1989 and established a political party, the Islamic Action Front Party (IAFP), in 1992. The Islamists’ electoral successes and their opposition to the 1994 normalisation agreement with Israel tested their relationship with the king, but confrontation never led to extreme actions on either side. Support for democracy and pluralism has been ‘one of the most successful and widely supported of the IAFP’S political goals’.50 The Islamists’ inclusion in the political process appears to have successfully encouraged them towards greater acceptance of democratic principles – although they still have a long way to go before they become true liberals.

However, the case of Tunisian Islamism demonstrates the reverse: that non-violence and moderation may also derive from exclusion from the political process and repression. Of all the Arab states, Tunisia has been the most secular, particularly in family law, and as a result the challenge of Islamism to the authoritarian rule of Habib Bourguiba’s in the 1980s was particularly poignant. Following his overthrow by Zine el Abidine Ben Ali in 1987, a short democratic opening ensued. But the electoral success of the Islamist Nahda movement in the 1989 elections, its evident widespread popularity and the meteoric rise of the Islamists in neighbouring Algeria alarmed the regime. Thus, it quickly reverted to a closed system characterised by the rigging of elections, the muzzling of the press, and the harassment and imprisonment of opposition and civil society activists.51 Individual Islamists and their families bore the brunt of the repression.

The result of this policy was greater moderation on the part of Nahda, and specifically its leader, Rashid Ghannouchi (in exile since 1989). Ghannouchi’s writings and pronouncements are appreciative of liberal values and democratic institutions; tolerant of minorities and open to greater equality towards women. He ‘endorses multi-party politics and the participation of Islamists in a non-Islamic government’.52 In the early 1990s there were some episodes of Islamist violence and clashes in response to state repression but thereafter the movement retreated from the political arena. ‘[Thus], instead of responding militantly to a consistent policy of exclusion, the Islamist movement in Tunisia more often than not sought to dispel charges of subversion and fanaticism made against it by reaffirming its commitment to legalism, pluralism and incrementalism. Accommodation and retreat, not rebellion, was the response of Tunisian Islamists to institutional exclusion.’53 It was also their response to the repression they suffered under Ben Ali’s police state.54
If the Jordanian and Tunisian cases support clear, albeit opposing answers to the central question of this paper, two other case studies, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and Turkish Justice and Development Party (AKP) provide more ambiguous evidence. As noted above, in the 1970s the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood had opted for a policy of conciliation with the Egyptian regime and consistently distanced itself from Islamist terrorism. It has increasingly made human rights and democratic principles its key objectives, and its platform now calls for democracy and political reform, civil liberties and the lifting of emergency rule (although it is far from having become a genuinely liberal Islamist party). In 1996, a number of its younger members formed the Wasat (Centre) Party which marked a further move towards Islamist moderation.55

The adoption of an accommodationist stance by the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood in the 1970s was partly the result of their being courted by Sadat as a counter-weight to the political left, and of the partial Islamisation of the Egyptian state. But it also arose out of the severe repression they had suffered under Nasser, which made them begin to appreciate human rights principles as defences against an authoritarian state. The Brothers were allowed to participate, as independents, in the national elections of 1984 and 1987, and their political and social activities were otherwise tolerated. Even if they first seized opportunities for electoral participation as part of a strategic calculation, they gradually came to see the value of democratic values and institutions. A group of them achieved positions of responsibility in professional syndicates and interacted with other opposition members. It was these members of the Brotherhood who gradually broke away to form the Wasat.

However, the Brotherhood was never legalised and in the 1990s it was prevented from political participation; its leadership was harassed and persecuted. It is possible, therefore, to see their increasing adherence to democratic principles, as well as Wasat’s creation, as responses to the intensification of authoritarian rule.56 Alternatively, one could also speculate that the Brotherhood maintained a non-violent stance because the regime never totally banned their activities and constantly dangled the carrot of further political participation.

The case of the Turkish Islamist movement is similarly ambiguous. Undeniably, the emergence of a non-violent, moderate Islamist movement in Turkey can be attributed to the Islamists’ inclusion in an ongoing albeit flawed democratic process. However it can also be seen that Turkey’s Islamists were coerced into moderation by an authoritarian political establishment.

Some form of a democratic system has existed in Turkey since 1950 and Islamists have been part of it since that time. Noyon suggests that the veteran leader of Turkish Islamism, Necmettin Erbakan’s, ‘background and political career indicate the striking extent, despite the denials of many of Turkey’s own political observers, to which Islamist parties have formed part of the Turkish political mainstream since the beginning’.57 Turkish Islamists were spared the severe repression meted out to Islamist opposition forces.
elsewhere in the Middle East and to leftists in their own country after the military coups of 1971 and 1980. Over a number of decades, participation in Turkey’s pluralistic political system and the pressure to function within constitutional rules liberalised political Islam in Turkey and arguably even led to its gradual secularisation. However, independently of this gradual and voluntary ‘socialisation’, Turkish Islamists were forced by the judicial system, the political establishment and the army to drop some of their more extreme demands and abide by the principles of Kemalism, one of which is secularism.

The Justice and Development Party (AKP), in government since November 2002, exemplifies the ways in which Islamist moderation in Turkey is the outcome of both participation and coercion. The AKP is the latest in a line of Islamist parties in Turkey and its increasingly liberal political agenda – some have described it as a post-Islamist party – is the outcome of a series of political and judicial challenges to its positions. Its leader, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, a former mayor of Istanbul, was imprisoned for insulting the secular values of the Republic and was barred from politics until a few months after the party he led was elected into government. Only in 1997, Erbakan’s short-lived Welfare Party government was perceived to threaten the secular and pro-Western orientation of the country and had been forced to resign after a ‘soft’ coup. Welfare’s successor, the Virtue Party, was a keener supporter of democratisation and joining the EU. Its lack of success in the 1999 elections, and further pressures from the judicial system to conform to Turkey’s strictly secular constitution, caused it to split into a conservative faction, which remained loyal to Erbakan, and a modernising one, which formed the current governing party, the AKP. The prospect of EU membership and the associated criteria seem to have provided additional incentives for the latter to move into an even more liberal direction. It is thus an open question whether Turkish Islamism would have become the moderate force it is today merely by being allowed to participate in the democratic process, or whether it was coerced into becoming so by an authoritarian state.

Conclusion

This study has shown that there is no conclusive evidence of a causal link between the democratic deficit in the Middle East and Islamist terrorism. Although there are cases where exclusion from the political process and repression have radicalised Islamist movements and where inclusion of Islamists has ensured their moderation, a wider sample clearly demonstrates that this relationship does not always hold. It is reasonable to conclude, therefore, that the causes of Islamist radicalisation lie elsewhere. For example, it may be more adequately explained by social factors, such as the class composition of Islamist supporters; the emergence and evolution of state structures and state-society relations; the level of social and economic development; gender relations; the internal power politics of Islamist movements; psychological and sociological factors particularly with regards to how Islam is conceptualised in societies under strain; and unique factors such as the role of returnees from Afghanistan to their countries of origin.
This paper has investigated the concrete linkages between democracy and terrorism in the Middle East. However, authoritarianism in the region also influences political culture in more intangible and, arguably, more pernicious ways. It has contributed to the emergence of a ‘rhetorical’ politics which pays inordinate attention to morality and high principle, to the detriment of the actual workings of power and domination. This de-politicisation has also shaped the political stance of Islamist movements rendering political Islam, in an ironic twist, decidedly non-political. If one understands democracy as the politics of the mundane, rather than high principle, the high costs of de-politicisation to the prospects of democratisation in the Middle East can be immediately recognised. De-politicisation may also be connected to the emergence of violent as well as conservative movements in the region. However, this possible link between the democratic deficit in the Middle East and Islamist terrorism is difficult to test and must remain in the realm of speculation.

A significant implication of this study for Western policy towards the Middle East is that an excessive concentration on democracy as the solution to the Islamist terrorist problem is misguided. Democracy ‘there’ will not automatically entail security ‘here’, and Western policy must include a range of instruments and policies to tackle the multi-faceted phenomenon of Islamist militancy effectively. It must also accept that, similarly to other terrirsm, it may never be completely eradicated.

A second implication of this paper’s findings is that, for democratisation to occur in the Middle East, Islamist opposition parties must be included in the process, provided of course that they declare their adherence to democratic values and institutions. Western governments have, so far, been ambivalent on whether democracy promotion means buttressing secular opposition forces so that they provide a counter-weight to Islamist opposition or supporting secular and Islamist opposition parties in equal measure against incumbent regimes. Resolving this critical dilemma is essential for Western policies to be effective in promoting democracy in the Middle East and for the relationship between Islam and the West which in turn impacts on Islamist terrorism.

1 The conservative Islamist Front Islamique du Salut (FIS) was poised to win national elections in Algeria in January 1992 when a military coup overturned the electoral process.

7 I have used Hafez’s criteria here.


10 Note that the debate on the causes of radical Islamism is distinct from the debate on the causes of political Islam: political Islam need not, of course, be violent. Islamist radicalism is not tantamount to Islamist conservatism either: numerous Islamist movements are conservative but not violent.


13 Luigi Bonanate, ‘Some Unanticipated Consequences of Terrorism’, Journal of Peace Research, Vol. 16, 1979, pp. 197 – 211. The concept of a ‘blocked society’ is intriguing and would be relevant to Middle East societies but Bonanate does not really develop it.


22 I am grateful to my research assistant, Annika Bolten, for carrying out the statistical analysis.


28 Ibid., p. 5.


32 The Lebanese political system has been controlled by Syria since the end of the civil war in 1989-90 and, in a context of growing authoritarianism, political parties have atrophied. The partial exception is The Society of the Muslim Brothers, New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.


36 Ibid., p. 125.


42 Hafez, Why Muslims Rebel. See also: Mohammed M. Hafez and Quintan Wiktorowicz, ‘Violence as Contention in the Egyptian Islamic Movement’. Wiktowicz (ed.), Islamic Activism.


45 Kepel, Jihad, p. 283.


47 Kepel, Jihad, pp. 283-96.


51 Hafez, Why Muslims Rebel, p. 63.

52 Hafez is wrong when he says that the Tunisian Islamists suffered only exclusion, not repression. Repression was widespread and has been well documented by numerous Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch reports.


56 Ibid. pp. 69 and 74, and Kepel, Jihad, pp. 342-3; Onis 292.


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