

Islamism in West Asia-North Africa

The Rise of Islamism and the Muslim Brotherhood

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Islam in a shifting order

The fall of the Ottoman Empire in 1924 triggered a crisis in the Muslim world, challenging Islam's position in the world order. Particularly with the rise of the nation-state, Muslims' transnational *Ummah*, or community, faced potential political diminution. This crisis provoked a new wave of thinking among Islamic scholars.

One man in particular, Egyptian school teacher Hasan al-Banna, reconceptualised Islam's position within a changing world or, as he saw it, advocated a return to Islam's roots. Al-Banna took particular issue with Western, secular and nationalist influences in Egyptian society; his response entailed the reestablishment of the Islamic state from the time of Prophet Mohammad.¹ In 1928, al-Banna founded the Muslim Brotherhood to transform his idea into action, initiating the first wave of modern "Islamism." Broadly speaking, Islamism is belief in governance under Islamic principles, generally those derived from *Shariah*, or Islamic law. Its manifestations, however, are diverse; Islamists range in ideology and in their vision for an ideal Islamist state.

The Development of the Muslim Brotherhood

Al-Banna's Brotherhood would grow to inspire many kindred Sunni Islamist organisations and remains influential upon its fellow organisations worldwide. From the beginning, the Brotherhood grew rapidly, shifting from social to political action and establishing a paramilitary wing in the 1940s.² By many accounts, the Brotherhood's trend towards violence during the forties can be attributed more to rogue factions rather than to Al-Banna.

Al-Banna's assassination in 1949 transferred leadership to his infamous successor, Sayyid Qutb. Qutb's influential writings and radical, violent, and anti-Western rhetoric inspired splinter organisations including Egypt's Islamic Jihad and Al-Qaeda. But the Brotherhood stepped away from his teachings, and in a compromise with Egyptian President Sadat, they renounced violence in the 1970's.³

The Brotherhood's peaceful methodology drew enmity from their violent jihadist rivals. Nonetheless, the Brotherhood established a popular and respected presence providing essential social services to Egypt's poor.⁴

Under its current mandate, the Brotherhood supports the peaceful development of an Islamic state under Shariah law in Egypt and encourages the spread of their ideology throughout the Muslim world. After Mubarak's 2011 departure, their organizational structure and strong rapport with Egypt's disenfranchised became their principal asset. The Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party succeeded in early elections and dominated the re-drafting of the Constitution, peaking with candidate President Morsi's term in office, but cut short by popular protest and a military takeover in July 2013.

Morsi's time in office was too brief to allow for a genuine evaluation of his party's capacity for democratic participation; moreover, a single representative hardly qualifies as a measure of broader party intentions. In any case, since the military gained power in Egypt, the organisation has lost much political power and faced a severe crackdown. Thousands of supporters and the Brotherhood's core leaders have been imprisoned.

Muslim Brotherhood splinter movements in WANA

The Muslim Brotherhood has partner organisations worldwide but little international coordination. Three Brotherhood-tied organisations, the Turkish AKP, Tunisian Ehhahda, and Palestinian Hamas, are particularly important to understanding Islamism in the West Asia-North Africa region. Their differences typify the extent of divergence between the Egyptian Brotherhood and its splinter movements in their local contexts. At the same time, all four have shown willingness to participate in democratic processes, a path denounced by the most extreme self-proclaimed Islamist organisations.

Turkey's AKP

After gaining power in 2001, Turkey's Justice and Development Party, or AKP, served as the West's model Islamist organization for its pragmatic, democratic participation until 2011. Notably, AKP founder and Turkish President, Recep

¹ Ullah, Haroon V. *Vying for Allah's Vote: Understanding Islamic Parties, Political Violence* (2013) 79.

² "Profile: Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood." BBC (2013) <<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-12313405>> at 20, October 2014.

³ Laub, Zachary. "Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood." Council on Foreign

Relations (2014) <<http://www.cfr.org/egypt/egypts-muslim-brotherhood/p23991>> at 15, October 2014.

⁴ Ramadan, Walaa. "The Muslim Brotherhood and IS are not the same thing" Middle East Monitor (2014) <<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/articles/africa/14277-the-muslim-brotherhood-and-is-are-not-the-same-thing>> at 13, October 2014.

Erdogan, considers his party conservative democratic rather than Islamist.⁵ However the AKP has longstanding ties with the Brotherhood and is widely considered Islamist.

As a political party, the AKP prioritised pragmatic economic policy and political liberalization for over a decade with great success. Their popularity enabled the AKP to consolidate considerable political power, particularly in relation to former *kingmaker*, the Turkish military. After landslide electoral victories in 2011, the AKP found themselves lacking a major opposition party. Since then, against the backdrop of a major corruption scandal, progressive reforms have stalled. Analysts consider this drift towards authoritarianism more indicative of the dangers of unchecked power than a solid rebuke to Islamism's compatibility with democracy.⁶

Tunisia's Ehhnahda or the Renaissance Movement

After Morsi's fall, Tunisia's Ehhnahda became the sole case study for Islamist parties in an Arab democracy.⁷ Ehhnahda is committed to acting as a moderate Islamic voice within a democratic and equal civil Tunisian state.⁸ Thus far their actions powerfully reinforce their words. Ehhnahda has proven adept at compromise and conceding power. After Ehhnahda took a plurality of the votes in 2011 elections, their government stepped down of its own accord to quell political chaos in 2013, enhancing their democratic legitimacy.⁹ Ehhnahda sacrificed presidential election in November 2014 to prioritise electoral victories in parliament. The strategy fell short when the secular, establishment-tied Nidaa Tounes party won those October elections.¹⁰ It remains

⁵ Taspinar, Omer. "Turkey: The New Model?" Brookings (April 2012).

⁶ Yildirim, A. Kadir. "Opposition, the AKP and democracy in Turkey." *Open Democracy*. 21 March, 2014. <<https://www.opendemocracy.net/arab-awakening/akadir-yildirim/opposition-akp-and-democracy-in-turkey>> at 14, October 2014.

⁷ Lewis, Aidan. "Profile: Tunisia's Ennahda Party." BBC. 25, Oct. 2011. <<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-15442859>> at 14, October 2014.

⁸ Muashar, Marwan. *The Second Arab Awakening*. Yale University Press (2014) 57.

⁹ Alexander, Christopher. "Tunisia's Islamists I: Ennahda." Wilson Center. 18, Dec. 2013.

¹⁰ Marks, Monica. "The Tunisian election result isn't simply a victory for secularism over Islamism." *The Guardian*. 29, October 2014.

to be seen whether the establishment party will maintain an open, democratic system in which Ehhnahda can authentically participate.

Hamas

The Gaza-based organization Hamas is possibly the Muslim Brotherhood's most well-known spinoff and illustrates its longstanding commitment to a Palestinian state. Established in 1987 during the first Palestinian intifada, Hamas aspires for an Islamic state in a liberated Palestine. It broke off from the Brotherhood to protect the Egyptian organisation from association with Hamas's militant activities.

Although Hamas has a notorious militant wing, the organisation supports democratic processes and participates in elections. For the international community, this political activity does not discount their violent acts; the European Union and United States have declared Hamas a terrorist organization. Such status, among other issues, meant their electoral success in 2006 led to division of the Palestinian territories that continues today. Hamas took leadership in Gaza while their secular rival, Fatah, leads the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank. Most recently, Muslim Brotherhood losses in Egypt and antipathy from Sisi's government have weakened Hamas, encouraging reconciliation efforts with Fatah.¹¹

Islamism post-2015

As the consequences of the Arab Spring renew uncertainty across the region, understanding Islamist parties' role in its aftermath is essential. Forays into democracy during this period show the major influence of Islamists even in relatively secular Tunisia. And the respective outcomes of Islamist successes in Egypt and Tunisia show how much context matters; Tunisia's military has far less experience in political involvement. For skeptics to discount Islamist capacity to participate democratically based on the Brotherhood's comings, risks handing the reigns to the organisations that operate through violence.

¹¹ Laub, Zachary. "Hamas." Council on Foreign Relations (2014) <<http://www.cfr.org/israel/hamas/p8968>> 25, October 2014.



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