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1. Introduction

Domestic instability, domestic terrorism, manipulation of internal oppositions by external powers, disruptive attittudes towards regional and international cooperation are the main security risks presently posed by the existence of Islamist movements in North Africa and in the rest of the Arab world.

These risks are not mainly the consequence of Islamist ideology, or of the Islamist movements' political strategy, nor do they result primarily from the local government's anti-Islamist tacticts. These risks and tensions are first of all the consequence of the authoritarian patterns of Arab domestic politics that do not allow for peaceful political change and power sharing. In fact, the Islamist movements are first of all local political actors engaged in a process of political change which has a significant regional and international dimension, but remains primarily linked to domestic dynamics.

2. Dilemmas of democratization in the Arab World

The existence of Islamic movements representing a political alternative is by no means a recent phenomenon in the Arab World and the political dilemmas it poses today are in many ways part of a recurrent and broader problem of how to ensure peaceful political change and political participation in this part of the world. In contemporary Arab politics, all opposition movements -liberal, nationalist, socialist and communist alike- have shared with the Islamists the dilemmas posed by the lack of conditions for participatory politics, and they have always oscillated between accommodation and radicalism to challenge the authoritarian regimes monopolizing the instruments of state power.

These basic patterns of Arab domestic politics remain fundamentally unchanged today, but the combined effects of socio-cultural modernization and limits on the allocation power of the state introduced by the fall of oil revenues are gradually changing the conditions which have allowed these traditional patterns to persist. These changes are in many ways part of that "third wave of democratization" unleashed worldwide by the economic and political failure of centralized socialist systems.

Pressed to respond to worsening political and economic crises during the eighties, and more markedly in the second part of the decade, a number of Arab countries have adopted measures of economic and political liberalization that seemed to open a transition towards more liberal economic and political systems in the countries concerned, as well as in the whole Middle Eastern region. In this context the Islamist movements were able to position themselves as the only alternative to the embattled regimes and challange their legitimacy to direct the change, since all other opposition forces had been either suppressed or discredited.

However, in the Middle East in general and in the Arab world in particular, the process of liberalization is not proceeding smoothly. Developments occurred in the last three years in North Africa show that completion of the transition remains problematic, while its very direction may be shifting towards new forms of authoritarianism and political conflict.

Clear symptoms of this are the slow progress or abandonment of economic privatization schemes in Egypt and Algeria as well as the collapse or the limited success of electoral processes in Algeria, Tunisia and Egypt.

Although the economic and political aspects of the transition are deeply intertwined, the main stumbling block in the North African liberalization process seems to lie in the political arena. If democracy is operationally defined as the situation in which competing political forces accept common rules by which all political actors are given a voice in governing the system according to their representation, no North African country seems to have reached this stage.

The causes of this state of affairs are manifold and give reasons to believe that the Arab political culture is still totally prisoner of a kind of "zero-sum game" mentality, whereby each political force claims for exclusive political dominance that necessitates the literal- if not physical- obliteration of its opponents. A more optimistic view could stress that democracy has taken centuries to become consolidated in most parts of the world, and that the growth of civil society and the withdrawal of the State from the economy are indications of an incremental process that will eventually lead to true democracy in the Arab world as well.

3. Evolution in the Maghreb

Whatever view one is inclined to support for the long term, in the short term the political confrontation between Islamist oppositions and governments in Algeria, Tunisia, and Egypt reinforces the "zero-sum game" mentality and weakens the incremental progress towards democracy. In 1992, Algeria saw the cancellation of the nation's first free parliamentary elections, the forced resignation of one head of state and the assassination of a second, the seizure of power by a military-backed regime, the declaration of the state of emergency and a deepening conflict between police forces and Islamist insurgents that has claimed the lives of 600 people[1] and shows no sign of being brought under control in spite of illimited prorogation of the state of emergency announced on February 7, 1993.

In Tunisia, the Islamist movement an-Nahda, repeatedly accused of terrorist acts and conspiracy, was the target of a string of police crackdowns and of a crucial trial for the plot to kill President Ben Ali culminated in August 1992 with 279 prison sentences, including the movement leader Ghannouchi. Security actions were accompanied by the refusal to allow even moderate Islamists to enter electoral politics; the assignment of an increasing number of military and police officials to administrative posts; and the introduction of measures of restriction on all political activities such as the new law on political associations passed in June 1992.

In Egypt, during a year marked by Islamist attacks on Coptic Christians, police forces, secular intellectuals and Western tourists, especially in the Southern provinces of Sohag and Assiut, the government has introduced the death penalty for anyone belonging to loosely defined 'terrorist' organizations and extended the powers of security forces to include preventive detention without trial. Parallel to the crackdown on Islamist radicals, the Egyptian government seems to be abandoning a policy giving controlled access to political participation to opposition forces by amending the electoral law and the rules regulating elections in professional associations to prevent the moderate Muslim Brotherhood's from building a parliamentary bloc in alliance with recognized parties and controlling professional

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[1] 250 security personnel, 218 Islamists and 131 other citizens according to the correspondent of <u>Le Monde</u> (Feb. 9, 1993).

associations. The limits of the policy of controlled access were however made clear by the very low electoral turnout in recent elections and the discrepancy between the Islamists' results in different types of elections (e.g. between Islamists'1992 results in local elections and whose in professional associations).

Summing up, in 1992 the three North African countries saw political participation of the Islamist opposition either banned, as in Algeria and Tunisia, or seriously hampered as in Egypt. Restrictive measures were taken on two main grounds: on the one hand the seriousness of the commitment of the Islamists to democracy was denied; on the other, the escalation of violent Islamist attacks against the state and specific components of the national community (women, non-Muslims minorities, secular forces) was seen as a security threat necessitating further reductions of existing civil liberties. Needless to say, these restrictive measures have affected all political activities, not only those of the Islamists.

Moreover, all three countries (Algeria, Tunisia and Egypt) have accused Sudan and Iran of helping their respective Islamist oppositions. It is well known that Teheran, as well as Al-Turabi's National Islamic Front, the ideological underpinning of the present military government in Khartoum, have welcomed leaders from Islamic movements from elsewhere in the Arab world and in some cases have provided them with passports. Nevertheless, little concrete proof has been putforward by Sudan and Iran's opponents concerning more threatening activities like financing and infiltrating trained terrorists into other Arab countries.

Whatever their foundations, these allegations seem to have mainly the effect of stressing the external versus the domestic origin of the Islamist phenomenon and legitimating the treatment of the issue mainly as a security problem, not as a political one.

In this same framework, North African governments have accused the West of directly and indirectly supporting the Islamists, namely by hosting their exiled leaders (Tunisia vs. France, Egypt vs. US) and magnifying Islamists activity in Western media (Egypt).

4. Evolution of the Islamist Movements

The Islamist political movements may be described as part of a socio-cultural continuum encompassing individual mysticism, sufis orders, conversionist associations, reformist movements and revolutionary organizations. This continuum has never ceased to exist in the Arab-Islamic world and, particularly since the 1930's, its political wings, like other opposition forces, have cyclically oscillated between accommodation or hostility towards their incumbent governments. The same may said of the governments' attitudes towards Islamism, wherein conciliation or even support alternated with repression.

While violence and rejection against the state prevailed in Islamist action in the late seventies (suffice it to recall the Bouyali group in Algeria or Takfir wa-l-hijra in Egypt), in the mid-eighties, the prevalence of a gradualist approach, stressing penetration into the society through the establishment of welfare institutions and educational activities, led to a growth of political consensus around the Islamist alternative that reached the stage of a clear challenge to the ruling parties' legitimacy and power. This stage reached, some movements (possibly in Tunisia) abandoned their gradualist and conciliatory policies and went for an all-out insurrectional confrontation with the ruling forces that showed no sign of relinquishing their power; in other cases (namely in Egypt and possibly in Algeria) the movements were overconfident and did not take into account the fragility of their recent gains of political and economic access (the restriction on the Islamist activities in investment companies and professional associations in Egypt are a good cases in point).

In Algeria the success of a gradualist, 'democratic' approach of the Islamists to power was denied at the last minute by a palace coup and the abortion of the electoral process. The Algerian example is not without profound repercussion on the future development of the Islamist movements in the region as it weakens the position within the movements of those who still advocate the reformist way to power.

As a result of the inability of the North African governments and Islamists' movements to practise the sharing and limitation of power which is the basic rule of political pluralism, the liberalization process in North Africa is now in a stalemate, and the Islamist movements, that had experienced a full circle from violence to gradualism, are now back to violence.

5. Conclusions and Policy Implications

Two main conclusions emerge from the foregoing:
-Islamist movements in North Africa and in the rest of the Arab world are both protest movements fuelled by contingent socio-economic difficulties and the expression of deepseated political forces. The appeal of political Islam is not temporary; it was expressed in various forms throughout the modern history of the Middle East and is sustained by a deeply shared cultural heritage that, at present, has no ideological counterbalance. As a consequence, when the Islamist movements were allowed to run, they proved to represent between 30% and 40% of the electorate.

-The Islamists' presence in the society, their pressure on the state and regional role will not disappear; even though they may be presently on the defensive in North Africa where the integration of the Islamist element in the political process is currently blocked, the process continues elsewhere in the region (Jordan, Occupied Territories, Yemen, Kuwait).

If these conclusions are correct, they engender a number of policy implications:

1) The first and main implication of the Islamist phenomenon in North Africa is that it imposes the resolution of the basic political dilemma of the Arab world, that of democracy. In effect, if the process of political and economic liberalization is to be pursued in the Arab world, the issue of integrating the Islamist forces into the political process cannot be circumvented.

2) The Islamist movements should not be demonized; indeed, this works in favour of their own propaganda. Instead, Islamist movements must be treated for what they are: opposition forces with different strategies and trends, including violent radical offshoots. As pointed out earlier, the Islamists' recourse to violence is not inherent to their ideology, nor unavoidable; in fact, it seems strictly linked to the availaibility of other means of political pressure.

3) Regional governments should not be given unconditional support when they present themselves as the only alternative to the Islamist threat. International and namely Western partners, should put political premium on the continuation by the local governments of integrationist policies giving the Islamists real access to political participation.

4) Steps must be taken domestically and internationally to ensure that political change is approached within a negotiated framework, whereby all the protagonists set the rules for the initial stages of the transition. When such a framework is absent or weak, as in North Africa, the political contest inevitably transforms itself into a "zero-sum" confrontation, the transition to democracy is aborted and another cycle from violence to accommodation begins in domestic politics.

5) Another consequence of strategic relevance of the present stalemate in North African politics, is that the embattled regimes may seek an ideological underpinning in

renewed nationalism. As the military retake the forefront in the struggle for national security, external threats are magnified and dormient controversies risk to flare up again. Cases in point are the renewed Egyptian-Sudanese dispute over the Halaib triangle[2], and the latent conflictuality between Algeria and its Southern neighbors (in addition to the oscillating attitude of the new regime toward the Western Sahara issue).

In any case, it will take time before the political dilemma of the Arab world is solved. Meanwhile, the region and its international partners will be faced with its effects: domestic instability, terrorism, manipulation of oppositions in the framework of interstate competition, disruptive attitudes towards regional and international cooperation.

Policy actions towards these factors can only be country- and issue-specific and the notion of a global Islamist threat should be abandoned. As a general rule the West should direct its actions and policies in light of its ultimate interest in seeing political and economic pluralism established in the Arab world.

In fact, the establishment of pluralistic systems in the Arab world is in Western interest not only as a matter of defending human rights or abstract political principles, something that real-politik minded politicians may be ready to bypass for the sake of stability. What is at stake are the long term prospects for more stable and less warprone governments in a region that remains of crucial strategic importance for Western economic and military security.

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[2] Situated on Egypt's southeastern border with Sudan, the Hailab triangle is disputed because of different interpretations of the administrative boundaries set by the British at the time of the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium on Sudan.