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# Neo-Islamism In the Post Arab Spring

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## **Abstract**

The Arab Spring revealed the rise of Islamists and a wave of Islamic movements across the region. The Islamist agenda is debatable on issues regarding their commitment to democracy, pluralism and individual freedom. Central to this is understanding their evolving definition of 'Islamism' and how the players view themselves. The article provides a brief background on which to describe and define the modern Islamist. The features of Islamist political parties are described. The researcher offers a definition of neo-Islamism that reflects its most modern trends, including characteristics: non-traditional religiosity; gradualism; Islam modernization; nationalism, and; pragmatic relations with the West.

*Keywords: Islamism, neo-Islamism, Arab Spring, Islam and democracy, moderate Islam*

# Neo-Islamism in the Post-Arab Spring

One of the most obvious facets of the 2011 Arab revolutions is the rise of Islamists and Islamic political parties. In the wake of that major political upheaval in the region, most of those Islamists were either in prison, in Western exile or operating underground. Some scholars argue that while Islamist militants and organizations did not trigger the Arab Spring, or even participate in the Tunisian and then Egyptian uprisings, they are 'hijacking' the Arab Spring in their quest for power (Bradley 2012; Cavatorta 2012). Controversies about the role and agenda of the Arab Islamists, as well as their taking part in these revolutions, have reignited the long-standing debate about Islamism and its commitment to democracy, pluralism and individual freedoms.

Although Islamists did not trigger the large-scale popular uprisings:

[their] decades-long resistance to autocratic rulers turned them into shadow governments in the peoples' eyes. A vote for the Islamists implied a clean break with the failed past and a belief (to be tested) that they could deliver the goods-jobs, economic stability, transparency, and inclusiveness. (Gerges 2013, p. 390)

In addition, the dramatic evolution of the uprisings since early 2013 brought Islamist groups to the forefront of Arab politics, triggering reconsideration of the terrorism factor, military coup d'état models, and the urgent need to review moderate Islamism and its commitment to pluralism and democracy. Also needed is a thorough examination of the quick rising opportunistic terrorist groups like the Islamic State in Iraq and Levant (ISIL) and al Qaeda-endorsed Jebhatu-Unusra (JN), which have been able to take advantage of the 2012 Syrian revolution.

This study approaches only the so-called moderate part of Islamism, which is composed mainly of Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood (MB) branches across the Arab world, with their various names. These mainstream Islamic parties, despite relative democratic successes in Tunisia and Morocco, have brought to dispute their commitment to democracy and pluralism

during and after the 2013 ousting of former Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi. Accusations of autocratic rule marred Morsi's one year in office, resulting in massive popular protest and anti-Muslim Brotherhood sentiments and a stark change in regime (Wolf 2014). Meanwhile, the experience of Ennahda in Tunisia was quite different, with the party winning a free election and forming a coalition government with two secularist parties. Under a contagious Egyptian style *tamaroud* (rebellion movement) and secularist pressure, Ennahda willingly handed off power to an interim government in late 2013 in anticipation of the 2014 general elections. Islamists in Morocco have had success in practicing pluralism and in forging a coalition style government. The AKP party in Turkey has strengthened its position in power after the 2013 elections and Gezi Park protests, with historic leader Rajeb Tayyeb Erdoğan becoming Turkey's first directly elected president.

Islamism is a wide and diverse phenomenon with many undercurrents and tendencies. However, this paper focuses on Islamism as a moderate movement, as gleaned from recent history and trending, with its main characteristics and commitment to democracy and pluralism examined. The discussion includes a forecast of possible scenarios for Islamism's near-term future.

### ***What is Islamism?***

Political Islamism is a relatively modern phenomenon within Islamic societies across the world. The terms Islamism and Islamist in the political sense were never used in Arab or Muslim societies until the early twentieth century, coinciding precisely with the fall of the 'Last Caliphate' of the Ottoman Empire in 1924.

One famous Muslim theologian during the tenth century, Abu al-Hasan al-Ash'ari (874-936) published his influential book, *The Essays of the Islamists*, which features a compilation of

various narratives by Muslim scholars and theologians. Modern Islamism, however, has very little to do with theology or even Islamic laws or 'sharia'. It is an ideological phenomenon that aspires to excellence, though, viewing sharia as part of the utopian political system. Islamism has social as well as political aspirations, aiming to integrate Islam as such into politics, state affairs, economics and civil and constitutional laws. The most accurate definition is probably that of Mohammad Ayoob, who described Islamism as 'a form of instrumentalization of Islam by individuals, groups and organizations that pursue political objectives' (2008, p. 2). Ultimately, political Islam is a contemporary political ideology, rather than a religion, religious cult or theology.

The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood's famous slogan: 'Islam is the Solution', indicates that Islamism is a socio-political movement in the first place. However, Islamism, as Greg Barton pointed out:

[covers a] broad spectrum of convictions, at one extreme are those who would merely like to see Islam accorded proper recognition in national life in terms of national symbols. At the other extreme are those who want to see the radical transformation of society and politics, by whatever means, into an absolute theocracy. (Ayoob 2008, p. 2)

However, the growth of the Islamist extremism and so-called Islamic terrorism has made Islamist movements synonymous with al-Qaeda and alike international groups (Cavatorta 2012a; Roy 2012).

The Tunisian and Egyptian elections in 2011 have shown that no single Islamic party can claim a monopoly over the expression 'Islam' in the political sphere (Roy 2012d). Islamist extremism, to quote Dalacoura (2007),

constitutes only one element in a wider and more complex picture. Most Islamist movements in the Middle East have taken steps towards moderation and, in particular, towards incorporating human rights and democratic principles into their ideological discourse. (p. x)

The roots of political Islam are as old as Islam itself. In the days and months following the death of the Prophet Mohamed, various Islamist groups came into existence. Although not everyone called for Islam as a ready-made solution for their emerging societal problems or

political struggles, Islamists were involved in the public arena as political parties, scholastic or sectarian communities called *madhab* (Sunni, Shia, Alavi, etc). The most highly regarded scholars and authorities in the field were the Islamic theologians, specialized in dialectic and rhetoric, known as *Ulamaa Kalām* (literally, speech scientists). 'Kalām' is the Islamic philosophy of seeking theological principles through dialectic.

As Euben (2006) explains, Muslim political theorists:

were and are engaged in a series of debates within Islamic tradition about for example, the nature of political authority, the relationship between reason and revealed knowledge, and the proper way to be a Muslim. (p. 298)

Islamic philosophers discussed theological themes, such as the holy books, the prophets and messengers, how to prove the existence of God and the God sovereignty, but they also discussed highly controversial political issues in depth.

Ever since that early stage of the Muslim state, scholars and intellectuals have often been used by secular and religious rulers alike, to justify, manipulate and misguide the Muslim communities about their breaches of the sacred texts and to cover their illegal deeds. Over twelve centuries, the huge number of debates rarely evolved into an independent Islamic political science, nor did they go so far as to develop tools to define and protect personal political and civic rights, public liberties or to share power. As a matter of fact, the modern concept of reinstalling Islam into public life and considering politics an authentic part of religion was developed by 19th and 20th century thinkers who were motivated by the provocation of direct contact with the West. The most prominent of these thinkers are Jamal Eddin al-Afghani, Mohammed Abdah and Mohammed Rashid Rida, the founder of a famous intellectual magazine called *el-Manar*. Hassan Al Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, reportedly worked with Rida and was strongly influenced by his reformist opinions.

Al-Afghani and Mohammed Abduh's reformist views of authentic Islam as being a rational religion should be seen within a long tradition of *tajdid* (renewal) and *islah* (reform) in Islamic intellectual history and jurisprudence over centuries (Euben 2006, p. 301). Muslim

theologians and scholars' special focus on Islamic political theology, opinion and regulation continued alongside the emerging Islamic states until the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of the Turkish modern secular national state by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881-1938) in 1923. A year later, Atatürk abolished the Ottoman Caliphate, which was deemed a universal trauma for Islamists worldwide (Al-Rahim 2011). With the 1924 abolishment of the Caliphate, Islam and the state were officially separated. In response, the Muslim Brothers were established in Egypt in 1928, and four years later, Wahabis seized power in Riyadh (Elhadj 2012).

### ***The Muslim Brotherhood***

Modern Islamism started as a group around 1928, when, to quote Robin Wright (2012a), a twenty-two-year-old schoolteacher mobilised six disgruntled workers from Egypt's Suez Canal Company. It was originally a social and religious movement but Hassan al Banna's little group grew into the Muslim Brotherhood. (p. 4)

The MB founder, Hassan al Banna (1906-1949), dedicated his teachings to face the cessation of the last Caliphate, aiming for a transnational Islamic state. Islamism at this early stage, that is, during al Banna's life, was direct, simplistic and appeared to contrast with secularism. The Muslim Brotherhood, or 'al-Ikhwān al-Muslīmīn', the first popular Islamist movement in the Arab world, is a uniquely established organization that managed to spread to over eighty countries since its inception. It called for a bigger role for Islam in public and private life, in opposition to Atatürk's call for the state creed of secularism in Turkey.

Hassan al Banna's opinions of the Islamization of state and public life set up an absolute ideology about Islam as the only solution for political weakness, underdevelopment, imperialism and the Arab-Israeli conflict. The MB became active in Palestine in the 1930s, just a few years after its founding, providing arms and trained fighters to resist both the British occupation and the invasion of Jewish Zionist settlers (Hessler 2012). Al Banna himself rejected the use of violence in political *jihad* (struggle) within Egyptian society, despite the fact that during the next

eighty years, various Egyptian rulers accused the MB of using politically motivated violence or terrorism.

The MB constructed Islam as a modern ideology, and arguably politicized the Islamic faith, choosing not to add religiosity to the lives of its people, unlike other traditional religious revival groups (Roy 2013). This contrasts with the purely legal approach of *Ulamas* (Muslim jurists and religious scholars) who see the implementation of sharia as the sole criterion for an Islamic state. *Ulamas* believe that the Islamic state should have the power to implement sharia from top to bottom, or to re-Islamize the society onto the path of Islam. Such re-Islamization is claimed to be the duty of those in power (Roy 2013). Within the MB and similar Islamic movements, there is a widespread feeling that the cause of society's malaise stems primarily from a betrayal from within, rather than a domineering force from without' (Abdo 2000, p. 8).

Islamic thought in the late nineteenth century and from the 1940s through the 1970s focused on anti-imperialist sentiments and socioeconomic concerns, while after the 1970s, contemporary Islamic thought and Islamic sentiment focused on family values, nation-state internal affairs, traditional sexual mores, democratic transition and cultural authenticity (Abdo 2000; Roy 2013; Stepan 2012). Moreover, the 2011 revolution slogans by the post-Islamist apolitical youth or neo-Islamist cadres, was empty of anti-Western and anti-American slogans, and focused almost on one word: *erhal*, the Arabic term for 'go', and chanting 'The people want regime change'. This 2011 slogan spread from Tunisian streets, where it was actually uttered as the awkwardly-used French word *dégage*, to Cairo's Tahrir Square, to Yemen and the rest of the Arab countries.

The MB has always strived to participate in politics and has run in open elections. Despite Jamal Abd al-Nasser's accusations of coup plot during mid-1960s, which were never proven and always denied by MB, and despite the widespread torture of MB prisoners, and



unlike MB splinter groups such as *Gamaa Islamiyya* (Islamic Group, or 'IG') and *Jihad Islami* (Islamic Jihad or 'IJ'), MB was never involved in armed uprisings. 'Seventy years of cautious politics hardly qualify a movement as revolutionary' (Roy 2013).

Yet, the organization that has spread its branches over eighty countries has failed to lobby governments worldwide, contrary to what one might expect from a transnational organization that may claim hundreds of millions of potential members, be they activists or mere sympathizers. The MB has no great geostrategic design, as Roy (2013) observed. However, the organization never stopped its general rhetoric about solidarity with and belonging to the Muslim *Ummah*, the worldwide Muslim community.

One of the most prominent contemporary Islamist ideologists, Indian-turned-Pakistani Abul Ala Mawdudi (1903-1979) classified the major MB ideological concepts. His approach to Islam was quintessentially political (Ayoob 2008). As Ayoob (2008) asserted,

Mawdudi accepted only politics as a legitimate vehicle for the manifestation of the Islamic revelation and as the sole means for the expression of Islamic spirituality, a position that correlated piety with political activity, the cleansing of the soul with political liberation, and salvation with utopia. (p. 67)

Mawdudi was the first contemporary Islamic thinker to write about the Islamic state in a modern ideological context. Al Banna wrote about the Islamic state before Mawdudi, but his writings were mainly made up of speeches, sermons and letters rather than academic research. Mawdudi's concept of the Islamic state was the fruit of modernity and hence made him aloof from classical political thought of earlier Islam. The outbreak in the wake of decolonization of ethnic and religious riots in his homeland, the Indian subcontinent, led to the formation of Hindu and Islamic separate states in 1948. The latter, which came to be known as Pakistan, had much influence on Mawdudi and inspired him to adhere to the new concept of the modern sovereign nation-state, which might at first glance seem contradictory to the concept of the universal *Ummah*. In fact, Mawdudi meant to link the concept of 'state' to *hakimiyyah* (God's

sovereignty), which ultimately results in Muslims being governed according to sharia along God's path (Ayoob 2008).

One of the most charismatic thinkers of the Muslim Brotherhood movement, Seyyed Kuttb, was said to be responsible for the Egyptian *jihadi* and *Salafi* groups, which prospered in the 1970s. Seyyed Kuttb was sentenced to death in a court-martial, and then executed on 29 August 1966 under Gamal Abdel Nasser's regime.

Islamism has had a significant evolution during the past twenty years, at times leading to contradictory messages and agendas. Islamism gained ground during the 1970s and 1980s, especially after the assassination of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat on 6 October 1981. Later on, the spotlight shifted to Afghanistan and Afghan *mujahedeen* warfare and related victories against the Soviets. Meanwhile, North African Islamists in Algeria were denied access to power, when Salvation Islamic Front (FIS) was pushed aside in 1992 in a military coup, as a consequence of the Islamists' win of Algeria's first free election since independence in 1962. Algeria entered a decade-long civil war, during which over 200,000 civilians were killed. To quote Roy, '[T]he bloody aftermath of the Arab world's first democratic election had a ripple effect on the calculations of Islamist groups across the region' (Roy 2012c, p. 11).

Over the next twenty years, ordinary Muslims became fed up with the bloodshed that violent extremism caused. The toll of death and destruction that radical Islamism left in its wake also diverted interest in militancy and jihad (Roy 2012c).

As a result of MB's failure to achieve remarkable success almost anywhere in the Arab world, a new generation started to speak up and denounce some of old ideological concepts. The rivalry of older and younger generations are reflected in internal changes within mainstream Islamism. The young generation, unlike the old guard who continues to dominate the top ranks and decision-making, has been more eager for pluralism, adopting liberal concepts such as democracy and transitioning of power.

A key aspect of MB political and intellectual evolution is its move towards what they call a 'civil state', which integrates the utopian ideal of sharia with a democratic system that claims to protect a wide range of civil liberties (Tudoroiu 2011). The MB movement's discourse on democracy during the 2000s, which when:

confronted with the authoritarian regime's harsh repression, [turned] parliamentary democracy, full political freedoms and the end to all exceptional laws into central planks of its message and campaigns. The movement even became the largest and most effective force in the short-lived pro-democracy movement of 2004–2006. (Tudoroiu 2011, p. 384)

However, this significant shift was the result of a complex internal debate, and has touched mostly on political concepts and strategy, rather than marking a real change of ideology. Human rights groups, furthermore, fear that a Brotherhood-controlled government could impose strict social and political restrictions on women and Coptic Christians. Evidence from President Morsi's performance triggered these fears and provoked the secularists, liberals and Christians who failed to get a slice of the cake, or find common ground with MB and its agenda.

### ***Post-Islamism and Neo-Islamism:***

The term neo-Islamism has been widely used in the last twenty years in the media, and consequently by academics from various institutions to describe the phenomena of political Islam. Academics such as Khalifa (2012), Ibahrine (2012), and Boubekour (2012) used the term without defining it, though it appears that they mean the so called 'moderate Islamism' mostly associated with the Muslim Brotherhood movements, and might be extended to Turkey's AKP.

Mark LeVine sums up this terminology confusion in the following terms:

What makes the people and situations I have encountered 'new', 'post' or 'beyond' the traditional boundaries of what scholars describe as 'Islamism' (that is, religiously-grounded politics or social activism) is that they involve a redefinition of Islam and Muslim practice in which the bona fides of a particular action or believe from an orthodox Islamic legal or theological perspective, is no longer the primary criterion for judging whether it is properly 'Islamic'. (Boubekour 2012, p. 206)

Robin Wright, author of *The Islamists are Coming: Who They Really Are* (2012b), used the term 'neo-Islamist' to describe moderate members of the MB and its affiliates, such as

Tunisia's Ennahda Party or Morocco's Freedom and Justice Party, reputed to be progressive, pragmatic and striving for sharia's goals rather than its literal implementation. In this regard, the neo-Islamists, to borrow Robin Wright's words, can be described as:

more flexible [than other traditional forms of Islamism], informed, and mature in their political outlook. For them sharia is about values, civilization, and political context. Neo-Islamists are seeking the ultimate objectives of sharia but without bonding each situation to a certain religious text. They believe that Islam is dynamic and not a set of fixed rules and tenets, but rather an organic belief system that can adapt to or live with the times. Neo-Islamists can be progressive and, on some issues, even liberal [The] Neo-Islamists trust the reform scholars. (2012b, p. 9)

Wright fit Sunni Islamism into three categories: the first category refers to classical Islamism, which includes mainly the Salafis and some ultra classical thinkers of the Muslim Brotherhood like Seyyed Kuttb; the second category refers to neo-Islamism described above; the third category is post-Islamism, where 'its adherents separate religious and political discourse, although they do not divorce values from politics (Wright 2012a).

Under Wright's classifications, the post-Islamists will not embrace classical secularism, but on the other hand, they will not propagate sharia. As individuals, they might be pious Muslims and consider values and morals to be pivotal in political life. Wright cites Turkey's AKP as a typical example of post-Islamism (Wright 2012b). Wright's characterization, however, only provides a description of neo-Islamist values and some of their activities, rather than delivering a scientific definition or a method of distinguishing it from other types of Islamism.

In a recent paper, Roy (2012) uses the word 'new Islamists' to describe these old Islamist parties that are facing this new era of transition, from illegality under the old regimes, to power, noting the enormous changes in ideology and day to day politics. According to Roy:

The new Islamist brand will increasingly mix technocratic modernism and conservative values. The movements that have entered the political mainstream cannot now afford to turn their backs on multiparty politics for fear of alienating a significant portion of the electorate that wants stability and peace, not revolution. (p. 18)

Francesco Cavatorta (2012) uses the term 'new Islamists' briefly in describing the new religiosity associated with the Arab uprising and spontaneous cooperation with institutionalized political Islam. It appears that he means what Asaf Bayat (2007) called post-Islamism.

Within this same context, Gerges (2013) observed that Islamist parties are slowly moving away from their traditional agenda of establishing an authoritarian Islamic state and imposing Islamic laws, 'to a new focus that is centered on creating a "civil Islam" that permeates society and accepts political pluralism'. The Islamist parties are increasingly becoming 'service' parties concerned with providing social services and local public goods. Gerges added:

the Turkish model, with the religiously observant provincial bourgeoisie as its king-pin and a pattern of linkage with the business classes and market liberalism, also acts as a reminder that Islam and capitalism are mutually reinforcing and compatible. (p. 391)

Asaf Bayat (1996) observed the mid-1990s emergence of moderate Iranian youth which gathered around the reformist president Muhammed Khatami, calling them post-Islamists. He later upgraded the term to include breakaway factions from the MB in Egypt such as *al-Wasat* Party, which during the late 1990s tried to gain legalization, then the *Kefayah* (Enough) movement of Ayman Noor during the 2000s. Bayat (1996) defined post-Islamism as:

[the] condition where, following a phase of experimentation, the appeal, energy, symbols and sources of legitimacy of Islamism get exhausted, even among its once-ardent supporters. As such, post-Islamism is not anti-Islamic, but rather reflects a tendency to secularise religion. (p. 45)

Bayat's definition is quite similar to that of Olivier Roy's (2008, 2011).

Fifteen years later, Bayat (2011) stressed that post-Islamism is not anti-Islamic or secular; a post-Islamist movement dearly upholds religion but also highlights citizen rights. It aspires to a pious society within a democratic state.

Bayat (2011) described the youth of modern Iranian protest as the same people who filled Bourguiba Avenue in the front of Tunisia's Interior Ministry on 14 January 2011, and the same people who protested in the millions in Tahrir Square leading up to the ousting of Egyptian dictator Hosni Mubarek. Among the similarities of these groups is the understanding of the vital nature of social media to their political activities and to their practice of Islam. By this

recognition, the 2011 revolutionaries have exceeded previous organized Islamist movements and have led the way (Bayat 2011).

The changes, which led to post-Islamism in the last twenty years according to Roy (2011), '[ do] not mean that Islamists disappeared, but that their Utopia did not block social, political or even geo-strategic realities' (n.p.). Furthermore, post-Islamism emerged as a framework within which Islamic politics have a chance to become more inclusive. Muslims may confidently remain pious Muslims but also be eager for a democratic state (Bayat 2011).

During the late 1990s and early 2000s, critics disputed Bayat's concept of post-Islamism, arguing that what has changed is not political Islam (that is, practicing politics within an Islamic frame) but only a particular revolutionary version of it.

On the other hand, Francois Burgat and John Esposito (2003) argued that

the reassertion of Islam in Muslim politics challenged the presuppositions and expectations of modernisation and development theory that was predicated on the belief that modernisation required the progressive secularisation and westernisation of society. Thus, many have questioned whether Islam is compatible with modernity, democracy, civil societies and pluralism. (p. 3)

In this context, Esposito and Burgat suggested that the post-Islamists are re-Islamizing their societies and the globe, and not by de-Islamizing or secularizing, as Bayat and Roy offered in their concept of post-Islamism.

Furthermore, in his book, *Face to Face with Political Islam* (2003), Francois Burgat disagreed with his fellow citizens Olivier Roy and Gilles Kepel regarding the failure of political Islam and the post-Islamism concept. Burgat's viewed the 'failure of political Islam' to be in many respects the forerunner of Roy's (1994) decline of Islamism, and the founding stone of 'post-Islamism'. According to Burgat, for the adherents of the post-Islamism thesis, the failure or 'irrelevance' of Islamism is primarily a result of the inability of various movements to defeat dictatorial regimes (Burgat 2003, p. 180). The French experts on political Islam appear to have been affected by their exposure to the events surrounding FIS's

defeat in 1990s Algeria. Olivier Roy assures the reader in his book *The Failure of Political Islam* (1994) that ‘the coming to power of movements such as the FIS will only make more apparent the emptiness of the phantasm of the “Islamic state”’ (p. 27).

Roy may have come to a different conclusion, however, if he reviewed his ideas in the wake of the Arab Spring. Though the Islamist groups were not the leaders of the revolutions, especially in Tunisia and Egypt, individual post-Islamists were (Bayat 2011; Roy 2011, 2012).

Roy's insistence that political Islam has failed after the Arab revolutions is predicated upon his 1994 standard of the non-implementation of sharia, rather than on actual acquisition of political power (Roy 2012).

Burgat (2003) went further to criticize the promoters of 'post-Islamism', demonstrating that the processes of re-Islamization and modernization are far from being mutually exclusive:

The problem comes less from post-Islamism's recognition of modernity than from the belated nature of this recognition: this modernity has long been evident, even if deliberately and explicitly denied in the discourse of the political actors concerned. (p. 221)

Burgat gave examples of a significant minority of academic observers like Esposito, Fuller, Binder and Entelis who back this view (p. 221).

Within the Tunisian context, for example, the new religiosity and adoption of modernity before the uprising (while most Ennahda leaders and supporters were either in exile, in prison or underground) influenced the way in which Ennahda was re-established, behaved and, to an extent, changed during its revival in Tunisia after January 2011 (Cavatorta 2012).

Ennahda is classified as 'post-Islamist' amongst its supporters, candidates and voters, according to Roy and Bayat's descriptions. Ennahda leaders concluded that the events of the Jasmine Revolution that ousted Ben Ali, despite its not being born of an organized

movement, proved that if they do not catch up with the trends of the protesters, they would lose ground forever. (This is not to say that Ennahda leaders and supporters did not attend the protests in their individual capacity; they in fact did.) Ennahda would have to turn the old format of 'brotherhood' into a true modern political party:

trying to rally a larger constituency than hard-core devout Muslims, recasting religious norms as more vague conservative values (family, property, work ethic, honesty) adopting a neoliberal approach to the economy, and endorsing a constitution, and parliament and regular elections. (Roy 2011a, n.p.)

The Turkish ruling party AKP similarly provided an interesting example of how the failure of Islamism in government in the mid 1990s led to rethinking of it, which eventually delivered a series of poll victories of the AKP (Cavatorta 2012). Notable here is the fact that the AKP and Ennahda Islamists did not sacrifice traditional preaching within a movement or party. Rather, the groups as a whole made the adjustments, which corrected their previous errors and changed their priorities from global shariatization to democracy and the nation-state. The same individuals belong to the same Islamic parties, but with merged interests, in an era with new rules and constraints. They are not post-Islamists; they are Islamists with a new worldview.

Neo-Islamism is more a tactical strategy than a new ideology. Although it contains some ideological shifting, the changes are not fundamental. Neo-Islamists remain faithful towards the dream of creating of a state based on sharia, like the old Islamists. However, this might draw some confusion, as neo-Islamists like Erdoğan and Ghanouchi, have tended to dispel the notion that they are ultimately seeking to establish an Islamic state. In fact, the neo-Islamists prefer to focus on strategy rather than explicit aims, relying on the gradualist's approach, which requires patience, concession and sometimes secrecy, and not broad slogans and emotional propaganda. Turkish AKP leaders in particular maintain that they are not Islamists, that they advocate secularism, and have no intention of implementing sharia law.

Ghanouchi would not go so far as to advocate secularism, or drop sharia laws from Ennahda's agenda. However, he confessed that secularism could be part of Islam as mean of



separation of powers (Ghanouchi 2013, pers.comm. April). He previously triggered the sympathy of, and widely surprised the Tunisian secularist elite in a lecture delivered at a think tank 2 March 2012 stating as much (Ghanouchi 2012, p. 15).

In 2012, Olivier Roy considered the new wave of Islamists that came after the Arab Spring to be moderate and compatible with democracy. He went further to contradict his previous theories by concluding:

Since the Arab uprisings began in late 2010, political Islam and democracy have become increasingly interdependent. The debate over whether they are compatible is now virtually obsolete. Neither can now survive without the other' (Roy 2012b).

This latest view turns every Islamist into a post-Islamist who has reconciled with democracy and has turned it into the norm, acknowledging that Islamism and Islamists did not completely fail, so much as revisit and revise its old paradigms. However, we distinguish these post-Arab Spring Islamists from traditional Islamists, by classifying them as neo-Islamists.

Due to the recent Arab revolutions, the question of Islam's compatibility with democracy is no longer at the center of theological debate, though some marginal Islamist leaders and their followers doubt such compatibility. What Asef Bayat (1996) observed is an emerging new form of religiosity, which seems more in tune with the democratic ethos. Furthermore, Roy observed that some moderate Islamic thinkers who lived in exile during the last twenty years, such as Rashid Ghanouchi, co-founder of Tunisia's Ennahda Party, came to the conclusion almost twenty years before the Arab uprisings that democracy was a better tool to fight dictatorships than the call for either jihad or sharia (Roy 2012b). Ghanouchi has insisted that since the foundation of the Islamic Tendency Movement (IMT) in June 1981:

we adopted the democratic methods in full and we declared in that day that we are a democratic movement. Then, we reviewed then many concepts, on top of them the sovereignty; to see it since as derives from people not from Allah. We started to distinguish between Islam as reference and as source of power. Islam is not a source of power for anyone! The people only who validate the power and legitimate it. (Ghanouchi 2013, pers.comm.)

### ***Characteristics of neo- Islamism:***

It would be fair to state that the neo-Islamist phenomenon started during the 1990s with the Sudanese Islamist leader Hassan Turabi, who influenced other MB leaders and activists in the region, including Rashid Ghanouchi himself (Ghanouchi 2011). Also, the earliest 'Islamic governance' experiences, (apart from the Sudanese coup d'état led secretly by dual Islamists Omar Bechir and Hassan Turabi), involved the Turkish counterpart establishing the first modern Islamist-secularist power share. The Welfare Party (*Refah Partisi*, or RP), headed by the father of Turkish modern Islamists, Necmettin Erbakan (1926-2011), entered a coalition in 1996 with Tansu Çiller's Correct Path Party (*Doğru Yol Partisi*, or DYP) which lasted one year before the Turkish army and secular elite demolished the RP. Shock and political failure led the way to a younger leader, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the successful mayor of Istanbul, to review the coalition's methods and pave the way for Turkey's version of neo-Islamism.

Professional pragmatic young Islamists such as Prime Minister Erdoğan have made the issue one of semantics. Erdoğan has refused to be called Islamist or neo-Islamist. He prefers instead to be called a neo-secularist and advocates a neo-secularism which does not contradict Islam (Kuru 2013). The AKP denies being an Islamist or neo-Islamic party, despite Erdoğan's close ties with MB movements in the Arab world, support for their causes, and provision of logistics for conferences, academic support, and economic and commercial agreements with newly elected governments since the Arab Revolution, particularly in Tunisia and Egypt. The concept of secularism, however:

[varies] significantly; as recently as 2008, the AKP itself was defined by the majority in Turkey's Constitutional Court as being 'anti-secular' and only narrowly escaped a move to have it shut it down on those grounds. (Kuru 2013)

While it is difficult to compare the Tunisian Ennahda Party with AKP due to historical differences and experiences in the current strife between Islamism and secularism (Torelli 2012), leaders like Rashid Ghanouchi believe that Ennahda will take the path of AKP and will achieve the same success. Arab MB leaders such as Ghanouchi, Yussef Qaradawi and Salim al-Awaa have gradually transformed party definitions of the state, citizenship, the Islamic nation and

political participation in the last twenty years. This transformation in ideology would be necessary to align the party with the new religious youth, the instruments of change in the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions, and to encourage them to join or vote for the party in their first free election. This is where the so-called 'post-Islamism' forces join these newly renovated parties after the Arab revolutions according to Bayat (2011) and Roy (2011).

In a recent article, Roy uses the word 'new Islamists' to describe these particular Islamist parties that are facing this era of transition, from illegality under the old regimes, to power, and the enormous, notable changes in ideology and day-to-day politics. The term 'post-Islamism' would apply to young students and newly graduated unemployed men and women who never joined traditional Islamism or read its literature, but at the same time are as religious, pious and confident about their 'Islamic status' as any other Islamist. 'Independent Islamist' may describe a post-Islamist who practices social Islamist activism, but remains outside political parties and organizations.

As was the case in Turkey with AKP since the early 2000s, Ennahda in Tunisia, and JDP in Egypt and Morocco, new developments and pragmatic strategies have allowed the neo-Islamists to make sweeping gains in every election since the 2011 and 2012 Arab revolutions (Khalifa 2012).

Consequently, we can sum up the characteristics of neo-Islamism in the following five main trends: the renewal of religiosity, gradualism, modernization, redefining nationalism, improving relations with the West, and moderation.

1. ***The addition of new forms of religiosity:*** These are reflected in the Islamists' day to day private and public religious practices, due to media and communication revolutions, social media, satellite TV and a global wave of revolt and 'occupy street' movements worldwide.

Such new practices are demonstrated in the increased secularization in private life and social context as Bayat (1996) observed in mid 1990s.

2. ***Gradualism of Islamization:*** While Roy and Bayat believe that the post-Islamist tendency towards secularization is both strategic and of free choice, the researcher posits that neo-Islamist secularization is merely factual, and if evidenced, would be only tactical. This socio-political behavior, which Torelli (2012, p. 76) calls de-radicalization, should be understood within the historical context of neo-Islamism and neo-Islamists' struggles for their goals. This step involves both an official and unofficial adoption of AKP style pretended secularism.

The nature of this new generation of political parties focuses on quantity rather than the quality of its members' religious devotion. It is no surprise then, that Ennahda in Tunisia, the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) in Egypt, the Development and Justice Party (DJP) in Morocco, and the AKP in Turkey have opened their doors for membership to any citizen regardless of their religion or religious practice. Under these new rules, Tunisian and Egyptian Jews and Christians are free to join these parties. That was not the case under old-fashioned MB procedures.

Similarly, as Al-Rahim (2011) observed, this neo-Islamism phenomenon has led to an environment where 'we have political Islamists without Islam', adding that in this new Islamism, there is no clear '[explicit] campaigning in the name of religion'. The AKP example demonstrates an effective socially conservative campaign, upholding public (Islamic) morality and virtue, whilst fighting systematic corruption largely associated with the oldest centre-left Kemalist political party in Turkey (the Republican People's – *Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, CHP).

In other aspects, Ahmet Kuru (2013) distinguished two types of secularism of state:

- a- *Assertive secularism*, which requires the state to play an active role in excluding religion from public sphere, and making it a private affair; countries that embrace this form of secularism include France, Turkey (pre-AKP rule), Mexico, and until recently, Tunisia.
- b- *Passive secularism*, which requires the state to assume a passive role in accommodating the public visibility of religion. It is the dominant paradigm in the United States, the Netherlands and Senegal, amongst others.

The AKP has taken a half-step towards its final aims of full Islamization, and with major help from the Gülen movement, has succeeded in moving Turkey towards passive secularism by defeating assertive secularists in elections over the last ten years, and pushing them back in civil society, the media and the bureaucracy. What Erdoğan defended in his 2011 visits to Tunisia, Libya and Egypt was passive secularism, not assertive.

Tunisian Ennahda has gone so far as to agree not to include sharia as the main source of all laws in the Tunisian post-revolution constitution. This step does not seem to be a tendency towards passive secularism, but a tactical step imposed by the constraints of the political atmosphere. On 15 November 2011, at the evening of the Ennahda ballot win, and while negotiating with other secular parties to form a coalition government, Ennahda's Secretary General Hamadi Jebali, who would become the new prime minister later on, referred to the new government as the sixth Islamic caliphate. This slip of tongue led the liberal Ettakatol Party to suspend its participation in the new government, but later they reconciled after being promised powerful government positions (Chilton 2012).

These political choices are widely discussed in the latest MB ideologist literature such as the works of Qaradawi and Ghanouchi (Ghanouchi 2011), and meet an outstanding access within the ideological framework of gradualism and the Islamic public interest known in Arabic as '*maslahah mursaleh*'. Tariq Ramadan, a Western Islamist ideologist and

academic, declared that 'what is good for the world must be good for Islam, and what is bad for the world and its people can no longer be considered good for Islam' (Boubekeur 2012; Ramadan 2012). Theologically, this new thinking of gradualism, accepting Western political values of democracy, liberties and human rights, etc., found deep roots in the works of some of Islam's greatest jurisprudence philosophers, like Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī (1058–1111), Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah (1292–1350), Taqi ad-Din ibn Taymiyyah (1263–1328) and Imam al-Shatibi (?-1388). They all agreed that wherever there is good and positive interest, there would be the correct religion of Allah.

Gradualism is change that occurs or should occur in small steps. In politics, a gradualist believes that tiny changes are better than rapid ones. The so-called neo-fundamentalists, according to Roy (2011, 2012) do not believe in gradualism and desire the Islamic state and a pious Islamic society instantly. Most of these forces see the neo-Islamist steps of gradualism as political weakness, forbidden '*haram*' concession, and they might even call ideologists like al Qaradawi and Ghanouchi '*kafirs*' (heretics), as Salafis have over the past twenty years.

3. ***Modernizing Islam:*** Modernization in this context means the maximum level of acceptance of the tools of modernity and most of its concepts, as most scholars observed in their discussions of the post-Islamism phenomenon (Bayat 1996; Cavatorta 2012; Esposito and Burgat 2003; Roy 2008, 2011). While modernization does not necessarily mean Westernization or economic and technological development, neo-Islamists would argue that Islam is compatible with modern scientific inventions, cutting-edge technologies, as well as with most democratic and pluralist values that spread from the West.

Asef Bayat (1996) may have been right when he summed up post-Islamism in the phrase of an Iranian diplomat in 1995: 'We don't mind destroying mosques in order to build freeways'. In fact, the traditional Islamism of the Muslim Brotherhood has always

maintained its aspiration towards modernization, despite hesitating about Western values of democracy and human rights until the early 1990s. It was then that the new Islamists emerged with their 'controversial' adoption of democracy, the nation-state, the right of women to rule, and condemnation of violence and terrorism.

Bayat and Roy focused overwhelmingly on the Arab youth's use of social networks and media, street sitting and protest, use of foreign languages, consumption of cutting edge Western merchandise like signature jeans and American fast-food chains, etc., as an exclusive phenomenon of post-Islamists, (though Roy credits the practices to so-called neo-fundamentalists, also). The plain fact is, almost all modern Islamists use modern tools, or alternatively, Westernism, to various degrees. Even the *Jihadi Salafis* or *Hizb ut-Tahrir* (HT) cadres, who still believe that democracy is religiously forbidden and an evil Western tool of domination, are computer and social media savvy, and experts in the latest Western brands of various products.

In view of the failure of the old Islamism of the 1980s and 1990s and the current failure the Iranian 'Islamic Revolutionary' state, some observers doubt the compatibility of democracy and Islam in the first place. One journalist has already assumed the 'death of Tunisian secularism' following Ennahda's election victory in October 2011 (Bradley 2012, p. 17).

However, if the Arab neo-Islamists succeed in following AKP step by step, they would modernize their countries in the same way as their Turkish brethren did (Cavatorta 2012).

4. **Nationalist Islamism:** The international jihadist groups affiliated with al-Qaeda and the followers and supporters of *Hizbu-ut-Tahrir*, seek the collapse of the nation-state and reestablishment of the global unified Caliphate for the whole Ummah. Hassan al Banna focused clearly on the Islamic union and Islamic state and encouraged the development of branches of the Muslim Brotherhood in neighbouring countries, including Syria, Libya,

Lebanon and Sudan during his lifetime. Ideologists who came after him, for example, Seyyed Kuttb and Abu Aala Mawdudi, talked frankly about the global Islamic community and an Islamic state that crossed racial and ethnic boundaries.

Neo-Islamism, on the other hand, has focused on what it achieved out of the Sykes-Pikos agreement between major colonial powers at the end of World War I over ninety years ago (Al-Rahim 2011). The neo-Islamists tend to focus on state politics, though sometimes release inflamed statements or positions over Arab and Muslim events, and burning issues, such as the Iraq wars, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and occasional oppression and imprisonment of fellow Islamists in various Arab states.

Some neo-Islamists refuse to consider the *Ummah* being brought to a single Islamic transnational state. Their parties do not accept members from other countries and their political and economic objectives are directed exclusively to the nation-state in which they live.

5. ***Pragmatic relations with the West:*** Generally, the neo-Islamists desire good relationships with the United States and Europe. After the fall of Ben Ali and Mubarak, Ennahda and MB leaders met with American and European officials to discuss future relations. Some Ennahda leaders went to Washington early in 2011 to 'negotiate' with their American counterparts regarding the future governance of Tunisia. In general, MB politicians have maintained consistent condemnation of terrorism and targeting of civilians despite their criticism of the American wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, which they consider invasions (Abdo 2000).

Another of neo-Islamism's leaders, Erdoğan and his party AKP, enjoy a cooperative relationship with the USA and NATO nations, as Turkey is an active and strategic NATO member. Erdoğan is keen for Turkey to join the EU, despite the continuous rejection by its European neighbours, allegedly due to the country's religious and ethnic nature.



Recent American State Department's leaked documents and interviews seem to suggest that the United States' new strategy in the Arab world is to work closely with these neo-Islamists, supporting them in power so as to replace the old autocratic allies, while continuing to fight jihadis considered a threat to US security since 9/11 (Elmaazi 2012).

On this precise pragmatic tendency, Gerges (2013) noted:

Increasing evidence shows that the balance of social forces among Islamists has shifted toward pragmatists. It is a generational shift that favors technocrats and professionals, such as engineers, dentists, doctors, attorneys, and teachers, who are open-minded and reformist, less obsessed with dogmas, identity, and culture wars, and more willing to build governing coalitions with ideological opponents, whether they are non Muslim, liberal, or secular. For example Ennahda in Tunisia prefers to form alliances with liberals and leftists, not with the ultraconservative Salafis. (p. 392)

6. **Moderation:** Neo-Islamist movements such as Ennahda developed and promoted themselves as moderate, tolerant movements from the start. When Ennahda took power after the October 2011 election, furthermore, the official tune of moderation went louder. The party at times seems obsessed with its image of moderation. The Egyptian MB, and in particular, former President Morsi, on the other hand, have failed to promote a similar image, despite their victories in fair, democratic elections, and their status as victims of the tragic military coup which resulted in hundreds of civilian deaths and thousands of others imprisoned since July 2013.

Within the moderate Tunisian neo-Islamist context, observers like Cavatorta and Merone (2013) noted that harsh security measures and oppression had been imposed on Tunisians for decades, which pushed political players and Islamists to find alternatives and to make concessions on the go. Additionally, the rejection they faced:

made it possible and necessary for Ennahda to entirely re-elaborate how political Islam could contribute to the developmental trajectory of the country. From this elaboration flows the acceptance of the dominant discourse of democracy, liberalism, and market economy without which the party would not have been able to find much space in Tunisia. (Cavatorta and Merone 2013, p. 859)

Moderation is a long journey for the Islamists, and they have to show their sincerity and commitment to democracy, pluralism and institutional transitioning of power. When asked whether Islam needs secularism, Ghanouchi has given vague answers such as

Islam has not endured for so long because of states' influence but rather due to the large acceptance it enjoys among its adherents, in fact the state has often been a burden on religion. . . . [Should] religion be entirely emancipated from the state and politics, this would also carry some risks whereby things would get out of control and social harmony would be endangered. The way to do it, therefore, is to find a balance that would guarantee people's freedom and rights, because religion is here to do exactly that. To achieve this balance, we need to go back to the issue of distinguishing between religion and politics and adjust the parameters of what is constant in religion and that which is variable. (Ghanouchi 2012, pp.13-14)

Ghanouchi's statements show that Ennahda is being driven by the exigencies of politics, which allows for wide interpretation of doctrine. The constant changing of position, furthermore, depends on necessity and calculation of formulas that fall within *maqasid a-sharia* (aims or objectives of sharia). Such elasticity is a core characteristic of neo-Islamism, especially after the Arab Spring.

The Ennahda-led government in Tunisia (from December 2011 until January 2014) showed utmost respect to this historic agreement and towards the toleration principle. Ennahda's contribution to the National Constituent Assembly (NCA) was forty-two women-- a larger percentage than all of the secular parties combined. Ennahda leaders 'reassured Tunisian citizens that it [would] not interfere in their personal lives and . . . [would] respect their basic human rights' (Growder, Griffiths, and Hasan 2014, p. 123). With these assurances came tensions between the Salafis and Ennahda, based on the belief that Ennahda's attempts to be seen as a 'moderate' Islamic party resulted in improper concessions in matters of religious doctrine.

Comparing Ennahda to Egypt's MB reveals Ennahda's political savvy, particularly with regards to the 'half-caste' neo-Islamists. President Morsi was in office for roughly one year before the army ousted him. While in office, he issued a controversial sort of constitutional coup, which demonstrated Morsi and MB's tendency towards autocracy and a refusal to cooperate with the opposition, let alone to share the administration with the opposition and politicians from outside the MB (Duran 2013).

### *New definition of neo-Islamism*

From the discussion above, we conclude that neo-Islamism's adherents have adjusted and developed such concepts, priorities and agendas of Islamic politics in response to the urgent question, 'What went wrong?' The impetus has been to redress prior failure to execute state shariatization and societal Islamization. In the absence of a proper definition, the author proposes the following definition of neo-Islamism:

Neo-Islamism is a tendency that emerged within the mainstream Muslim Brotherhood movement and its pro-democracy affiliates in the Muslim World, which uses liberal sets of concepts, for tactical or strategic purposes, while pursuing the same traditional goals of the Islamic movement.

### *Conclusion*

Some pundits doubt that the Muslim Brotherhood movement is changing conceptually, adopting democracy or considering any new or moderate versions of Islamism, nor that it is reviewing Islamic fundamentalism. American author, John Bradley, went so far as to suggest that Islamists have hijacked the Arab Spring (Bradley 2012, p. 2).

The West would do well to monitor the spread of Arab democracy in coming years. Judging from the recent military coup that deposed Mohammed Morsi in Egypt, the ongoing violence in Syria, and relative stability of the new Tunisian government, the only thing that can be counted on is that, despite the overwhelming outrage at Middle East's authoritarian regimes and the hope of the Arab Spring, Islamist parties are diverse and no future can be certain. Despite the majority's apparent longing for democracy and Islamist parties' claims of compatibility with democracy, only time will reveal the long-term impact of neo-Islamism on the political scene in the Middle East and North Africa, and on society at large in that part of the world.

No doubt, neo-Islamist claims for cohesion between Islam and democracy remain subject to discussion and await testing in coming years, but the intention, at least, appears to be pro-democracy and against the use of violence in achieving political change.

The Turkish government's controversial measures in dealing with its secular opposition in the Gezy Park protest in 2013, ministerial scandals and MB's refusal to share power with other elements of the Egyptian political scene cast doubt about some Brotherhood parties' willingness to bend towards internal and external democratization and pluralism, and would not indicate neo-Islamist tendencies. Rather, neo-Islamism is a trend and state of mind used in dealing with very modern and liberal concepts facing the Arab and Muslim world. The parties who have so far succeeded in accepting political concepts such as share of power, pluralism, and commitment to democracy would fit under such classification. As unintuitive as it may seem, parties that show no such acceptance, including Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, godfather of moderate Islamism across MENA and the Muslim world, would be excluded from this classification.

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