

# Bibliographical Essay on Egypt's Political Islam: Political Culture Debates and Historical Survey

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## Introduction

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## Introduction

In the Arab world, Egypt has been regarded as one of the forefront countries of political, social, intellectual, and religious development. Egypt also holds roughly over 50 million Sunni Muslims, the largest Muslim population in the Arab world. As a major political movement, Islam has influenced Egypt's national strategy. Political Islam in Egypt has at least three dimensions. The first dimension is traditional and state-authorized Islam such as al-Azhar, one of the oldest Islamic educational organizations in the world. However, despite its authority and legacy in Islamic education, al-Azhar is not very popular among Egyptian citizens because it has become unequivocally the voice of government, particularly since the Islamic debates during the Gulf Crisis (Baker 1994; Kikkawa 2001; Moustafa 2000). The second dimension, and perhaps the most important one is the modernized, popular but unauthorized Islam that is represented by the Society of Muslim Brothers (Jamā'a al-Ikhwān al-Muslimīn; the MB). Thus, this analysis will be mainly about the MB and its relatives. The third dimension is the radical, fanatic, and of course, unauthorized Islam, which is generally regarded as "Islamic Fundamentalism." This paper will identify all these Islamic movements as Political Islam although these movements' vectors are quite different from each other. Nevertheless, in the definition of Dessouki,

Political Islam is described as “an increasing political activism in the name of Islam by governments and opposing groups alike (Dessouki 1982, 4).” This definition pertains to all Islamic movements in Egypt because; first, most Egyptian Islamists are not looking for ways to return to the prophet Muhammad’s era, rather, they are seeking to re-Islamize Egypt by using modern technology and skills. Second, their core concerns are, “temporal and political (Beinin and Stork 1997, 3).” Finally, the original meaning of “fundamentalism” is rooted in a specific Protestant-Christian experience for example, Evangelicals whose principal theological premise is that the Bible is the true word of God and should be understood literally. However, Kōjiro Nakamura criticizes such a categorized view and claims that Islamic “resurgence” should be recognized rather as one of the world’s religious movements in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century than as specific phenomenon among Muslims (Nakamura 1997, 2-7.)

The aim of this paper will be to overview and examine the current notion of Political Islam in Egypt. Political Islam has two faces, an international and regional one. A major point of this paper is that Political Islam in Egypt can be seen as a regionalized political movement, albeit it is still difficult to draw the line between International movements and regional movements. As Yūjiro Nakamura notes, “although Islam seems unified, it geographically speaking, has vast areas and also contains many countries which have different historical conditions (Nakamura 1997, 21).”

Notwithstanding, most Political Islam movements, particularly those in the Middle East are regarded as international by many academics. Although Political Islam has many regionalized dimensions and faces, it is generally considered a collective international movement. For instance, both the Shiite Lebanese Amal and the Sunnis Algerian FIS have quite different histories, background, and philosophies; nevertheless both groups are often categorized as waves of International Political Islam. In the same way, while many academics admit Islam is a spiritual matter, they consider the resurgence of Islam in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as a major political force for reform, revolution, socio-political change, anti-colonialism, and even degeneration. Both state and non-state actors have also recognized this movement, the re-Islamization of society, as a significant political and social force in terms of alternative-political power, social

and educational reforms, religious-oriented populist and the introduction of fanatical suicide bombers (Esposito and Voll 1996). Nevertheless, the above issues and their explanations come from determinism – both spiritual and ongoing-political matters that are described as unitary divine decree.

On these matters, this paper will review and evaluate the debates on Political Islam from both political culture perspectives. Next, Egypt's case in political culture debates will be examined. At this point it should be accentuated that most Political Islamic movements in Egypt are regionally limited and are political, regional, and nationalistic in movement rather than spiritual. This conclusion is drawn by comparatively overviewing the cases of moderate groups represented by the MB and also the cases of several radical groups.

## 1. Political Islam in the Political Culture Debates and Examination of Egypt's Case

### Islam as a Political Culture

Many professionals use the concept of political culture consciously or unconsciously to explain the relationship between politics and culture in the Muslim World because there are few Muslim states that hold a consolidated democracy that can be studied. The political culture this paper argues is not the same as The Civic Culture written by Almond and Verva in 1963 (Almond and Verva 1974). At least The Civic Culture contributed to the development of a political cultural approach by using empirical, cross-national, and comparative methods, though their approach contained some weaknesses as Inglehart noted (Inglehart 1988). However, many of the following articles treat Islamic political culture as an impressionistic, unempirical and reductionist view. Islamic culture here is depicted as one of the biggest obstacles toward democracy, such as patriarchies or tribalism. Moreover, it seems that most approaches toward Islamic-political culture tends to be dichotomized, as Gerges calls Confrontationalist and Accommodationist (Gerges 1999). Both of these crucial discussions on Political Islam are essential because they address, "what does democracy mean in Islam? Or, is there any aspect of democracy in Islam?" Of course

this paper does not aim to judge such equivocal premises here, however it is useful to examine Egypt's political and culture debates.

#### Islam as a Collective Threat: Confrontationalist

Orientalism has been the most powerful, influential, and long lasting confrontationalist school in the West, and its ideas are based on fundamental skepticism about Islamic culture, precisely Arab-Muslim culture. Ironically, many professionals whether they are anti-Islam or not, misleadingly equate Islam and Arab culture as the same (Stepan 2001, 236). Moreover, most of these professionals easily make deductions from the following facts: first, there are no democracies in the Arab countries. Secondly, all Arab countries are made up of predominantly Muslim populations. Therefore, every Islamic notion, e.g., al-Qur'ān, shari'a (Islamic Law), and other Islamic traditions can be seen as a collective threat for democracy. For instance, Crone traces the characteristics of (tribal-egalitarian) Islamic civilizations – which strongly refuse to legitimize political authority – back to medieval ages. Through lucid analysis, she asserts Islam is not a democratic religion but a populist and political religion (Crone 1986). Elie Kedourie also asserts that there is nothing in the political traditions of the Arab world – which are the political traditions of Islam – which might make familiar, or indeed intelligible, the organizing ideas of constitutional and representative government (Kedourie 1992, 1-21). Kedourie also recognizes that democracy has failed in the Arab world because, “the idea of democracy is quite alien to the mindset of Islam (Ibid).” Similar to Crone and Kedourie, Pipes considers Islam itself as a crucial factor of their political instability and weakness. In Pipes's view, “Islam alone of the universalist religions makes detailed political [sic] ideals part of its basic code, shari'a (Pipes 1981, 62).” Therefore, by establishing ideas that are impossible to fulfill, Islam assures that Muslims view any form of government as illegitimate (Ibid 70).

As noted above, the absence of a consolidated civil society in the Arab-Muslim World has been the heart of a confrontationalist analysis. On the other hand, some academics stress the strength of Islamic civil society as the reason for its political backwardness. For example, Hall insists that states have been graphically represented

inside Islam. He wrote, “government thus has very slim roots in society...and stability came to depend upon such solidarity as the rulers of society could themselves achieve, as is true of most conquest societies (Hall 1985, 89).” Thus, in his argument, contrary to Europe – which possessed an organic state that distributed infrastructural services, and also civil society preexisted – a stable state did not exist in Islamic society. Therefore, “the fear of tribesmen meant that urban strata could not rule themselves, and a premium was accordingly placed upon military power. The states that resulted were transient and predatory (Ibid 102).” Popular anthropologist Ernest Gellner stresses that “Islamic Civil Society” exists, but it is different from the West. Gellner analyzes several types of civil society from ancient Greek to Marxism, and then, affirms that Muslims will never adopt Western-like values, as their standard because they support Muslim civil society – which seems like authoritarianism under strong rulers and the submission by followers. Gellner notes that Muslim societies are, “suffused with faith, indeed they suffer from a plethora of it, but they manifest at most a feeble yearning for civil society (Gellner 1991, 506).” Huntington’s Clash of Civilizations theory also sees Islam as a collective, authoritarian, and comprehensive Islamic Civilization (Huntington 1996). He asserted, “Islam...has not been hospitable to democracy...in Islam, for instance, no distinction exists between religion and politics or between the spiritual and secular...political participation was historically an alien concept (Huntington 1984, 208).” In another famous book *The Third Wave*, the author’s stance is very clear. For instance, “Lebanese’s consociational [sic] oligarchy, which is led by Christian – ex-predominant forces, collapsed because Muslim became a majority in that country (Huntington 1991, 308).” Notwithstanding, his analysis on Islamic political culture is concentrated on specific Muslim history in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. The author ignores some accommodative faces in Islam’s history, for example the Ottoman Turk’s millet system. In the words of Bernard Lewis, the millet system, “the members were subject to the rules and even to the laws of that religion, administered by its own chief (Lewis 1995, 321).” And it should be noted that he makes such a categorization – totally authoritarian Muslim political culture – by using very few sources such as Daniel Pipes. However, as Ghabbian notes, many academics do not regard Pipes as a professional on Islam (Ghabbian 1997).

Nevertheless, such logic exists not only in the West but also in the Muslim World. It is curious that some (especially Arab) thinkers indeed, including anti-Western Islamists agree with Huntington's Clash of Civilization theory, notwithstanding their criticism on it (Wiktorowicz and Farouki 2000, 685). Many traditional Islamists (e.g., 'ulamā', Islamic clerics) also share the view – incompatibility of Islam and secularism – with confrontationalists. They cite sūrah 5, verse 40 in al-Qur'ān on the application of the hukm (authority) of God as evidence for the religious obligation of an Islamic government (AbuKhalil 1994). In addition, some Arab leaders support theories of "Middle East Exceptionalism," instead of Islam. Quandt's citation hits the point, "these Oriental despots are espousing a kind of Orientalism, arguing that they and their people are different, exceptional, immune to the rules that govern the lives and feeling of ordinary people elsewhere. Such theories of Middle-East Exceptionalism should not be given any serious consideration (Quandt 1996, 11)."

#### Accommodationist Approaches

On the other hand, contrary to confrontationists, some academics stress that the West and the Muslim World are reconcilable and warn that confrontationists' (or reductionists') approach is only harmful. Alfred Stepan criticizes the confrontationalists' ideas for their falling into the "Islamic free elections trap" argument that most people in Islamic cultures are prone to fundamentalism (Stepan 2001, 233). He notes that many political activists, journalists, and even professors sometimes misleadingly equate Islam with specific culture such as Arab culture, and then he describes the issue of Islam and democracy empirically and globally by analyzing diverse political movements from around the Muslim world (Ibid). Michael Hudson insists that the political-culture concept has been misused and abused by Orientalism, Eurocentric chauvinism and anthropologic reductionism. In addition, Hudson also criticizes side effect of the anti-Orientalism movement led by Edward Said as the discrediting of political culture analysis because "without factoring in the complexities of cultures, values, beliefs, ideology, and legitimacy, we risk being left with arid economic reductionism (Hudson 1995, 62)." Anderson also warns against using political culture as a means of Orientalism, albeit mainly noting that it is an

Arab issue, not Islam. Anderson observes,

“Probably the characteristic of this literature most likely to strike an uninitiated observer is the negative tone of most of the assessments. Not only are Arabs thought to be dismal prospects for democratic politics, but they appear to be fairly dismal people all around: illegal, untrustworthy, passive before domineering rulers, while given to intrigue and violence – all in all, an unsavory lot (In the citation of Ghadbian 1997, 12).”

John L. Esposito and John O. Voll argue Islam and democracy are reconcilable through mutual understanding, although both of them still misunderstand and possess hostility and recrimination against Islam. Though they treat Political Islam (it is called Islamic activism or revivalism) as a collective Muslim movement, they consider Egyptian’s case as a movement strongly affected by Egypt’s domestic experiences such as the rule by monarchy and the United Kingdom, Nasserism, and Westernization under the Sadat and Mubarak regime (Esposito and Voll 1996). In discussing the relationship between Islam and Democracy, they point out,

“Like all of the major worldviews and religious traditions, Islam has a full spectrum of potential symbols and concepts for support of absolutism and hierarchy, as well as foundations for liberty and equality. However, in a context in which many non-Muslims question the existence of any conceptual or theological foundations for democracy in Islamic traditions, it is important to examine the conceptual resources within Islam for democracy. These include both the ideas and concepts of egalitarian participation and concepts of legitimate opposition. (Therefore) it is not enough to look at Islamic movements simply as rejectionist and revolutionary opposition movements, and it is also important to see how they operate as parts of heterogeneous systems and what the results have been when they come to power (Esposito and Voll 1996, Introduction).”

The view of Roy is clearer than Esposito and Voll. As a result of his empirical work, he affirms that Political Islam is not a serious enemy of the West because the Islamist

theoretical model has already broken down. For Roy, in terms of texts since the founding writings of Abu al-A'la Mawdudi, Hasan al-Bannā, Sayyid Qutb, Rūh Allāh Mūsavī Khomeynī, their ideas of umma (community) are just glossed-over citations of canonical authors. Moreover, in terms of concepts, their Islamic society works only if the society is already Islamic beforehand. Finally, in terms of action, Islamists have never succeeded in establishing a reliable government after their seizure of power (Roy, 1994). Though Roy severely criticizes Islamists and their concepts as nostalgia to the past, Occident-hater, and the apologia for Islam, he is not Orientalist. Roy also criticizes Orientalists as, “who are in turn adopting Max Weber’s reading of a timeless Islam: a culture, a civilization, a closed system (Roy 1994, 7).”

In general, an Islamist, yet moderate one is known as one of the conservative forces, nonetheless, many Islamists, for example Amal in Lebanon, the FIS in Algeria, the Jordanian Muslim Brothers, and the MB have been opposition forces against authoritarian regimes. In the MB’s case, it has been using common formulas to success. First, the MB possesses wide-ranging supporters not only through privately owned mosques but also through their own social infrastructures (private schools, hospitals, NGOs, etc – mostly for free). Secondly, they succeeded in controlling several Professional Associations (PAs; regarded as forefront of civil rights) through elections from the 1980s to the early 1990s until the government introduced a strict Syndicate Law 100 in 1993 (Sullivan and Kotob 1999, 55). These successes meant that Islamists captured the minds of young elites, “a significant increase in an Islamically oriented professional class, reflecting the numbers of young professional graduates (Esposito and Voll 1996, 185).” Another voice of civil society, Private Voluntary Organizations (PVOs) and Islamic Private Voluntary Organizations (IPVOs) have been rapidly increasing in number. According to Ibrahim, IPVOs registered with the Ministry of Social Affairs (MoSA) now outnumber the secular organizations (8,000 out of a total of 14,000) (Ibrahim 1999, 33).” Notwithstanding, PVOs and IPVOs activities are still limited. As Ibrahim noted in his works, the number of PVOs has impressively grown since the 1960s to the late 1990s, nonetheless, only a minority are effectively working. Because of the tight control under MoSA and the Law 32 of 1964, only about 40% of officially registered organizations are active (Ibrahim 1994; 1996, 236-237) because of



legal regulations, governmental supervision, and their systematic weakness. On the other hand, Singerman denies using stereotyped typologies when examining Arab-Muslim civil society. Singerman asserts that there is a trend to limit typologies of politics to institutions, actors and behavior that directly engage the state or public policy. Singerman also demonstrates how seemingly apolitical, local Muslim's social networks in Cairo are utilized as vehicles of political participation to affect the distribution of goods and services, the extractive capacity of the state and governance (Singerman 1995). In a similar fashion, Wiktorowicz and Farouki examined the relationships among socioeconomic development, political and cultural struggle, and Islam by using a case study of Islamic NGOs in Jordan. Although the government took a hard-line policy toward Islamists in the 1990s, they have succeeded in combating Western values and promoting Islamic values and behavior (Wiktorowicz and Farouki 2000; Wiktorowicz 2000).

The political-culture approach on Political Islam is getting more sophisticated than ever, but still tends to be a kind of essentialism, reductionism and overgeneralization. The typical problem is that many Confrontationalists and Accommodationists treat the relationship between political ideas in Islam and real politics in the Muslim world as unitary. In addition, many academics still misconceive Islamic political culture as the same as Arab culture as noted above. Another problem with this approach is what Ghabbian says, "Another problem with the cultural explanation of democracy or its absence is the assumption that beliefs unilaterally influence actions (Ghabbian 1997, 9)." Huntington also admits culture is too complex (e.g., Islam contains not only democratic ideas but also antidemocratic ideas) to be explained by a cultural explanation. Thus he noted, "(after the wave of democratization) the issue of economics versus culture would then be joined. What forms of politics would emerge in these countries when economic prosperity interacted with Islamic values and traditions? (Huntington 1991, 315)." In the macro-political arena, indeed, it is still hard to see a positive development of Political Islam take place in Egypt because of radical Islamic fanatical tactics and the Mubārak regime's hard-line policies toward any Islamic actors. Looking into the cases of Iran and Turkey, both non-Arabs, helps to evaluate how Islamic Parties and groups work in practice. In

the case of Iran, in spite of its strong Shiite-Islamic theocracy, the state evidently relies less on al-Qur'ān and more on constitutionalism (Deegan 1993; Roy 1999). In Turkey, the sweeping victories of the Refah Partisi (Welfare Party) in national and municipal elections throughout the 1990s did not create an authoritarian-Islamic regime. On the other hand, on a micro level, one can see many positive signs in Muslim civil society. Though PAs, PVOs and IPVOs appear as weak watchdogs on governmental activity, they are actually very effective and stabilizing forces in their community.

It should also be noted that many moderate Islamists are struggling between Islamic doctrine and real politics, as is the following case with Egypt. Though an underlying cause of the movement is based on a very local-socioeconomic factor, Islamists cannot ignore all voices from the Muslim community around the world. In the words of Baker, "in many ways the Islamist current, pulled in all directions because of its transnational affiliations, had the difficulty in achieving a unified position (Baker 1994, 410)." Thus, any discussion on Political Islam in Egypt must be based on a multifaceted reality, not a dogmatic dichotomy.

## 2. Historical Background and Diversity of Political Islam in Egypt

This section will explain the history of modern Egypt's Political Islam briefly and its conditions. From the beginning, this paper will reconfirm the definition of an ongoing Political Islam in Egypt from its revival. In talking about the renaissance of Political Islam in Egypt, there is a broad consensus among many academics as to when and why modern Political Islam in Egypt began. The Resurgence Theory is predominant among much of the recent thinking about the origin of Egyptian political Islam. This theory is the assertion that the decline of Arab Nationalism (remarkably after their defeat of the Six-Day War triggered Islam's increasing importance in the Middle East (Milton-Edwards 1996). Similarly, as Piscatori noted, "a new dynamism embraced Islam since the late 1960s, a time when Muslims began to reaffirm the importance of their faith to their social and political lives (Piscatori 1986, 24; Deegan 1993, 13)."

By the end of the 1970s, observers of sociopolitical development and change in Egypt recognized three distinct meanings of Political Islam. The first referred to the increasing appeal of “Islamic ideology,” that is, Islam as the source of political conduct and social life among intellectuals of the population. The second indicated the rapid proliferation of groups that acted, mostly through violence, to apply Islamic ideology. The third designated the rise, consolidation and expansion of an Islamic social formation, that is, a constellation of institutions, ideas, practices, wealth, power, and relationships which served together to implement the ideological program (Auda 1994; Mitchell 1969). Political Islam in Egypt during the 1970s was a sociopolitical expression of the contradictions and shortcomings of the modernization and transformation of state-society relations under Jamāl ‘Abd al-Nāsir and Muhammad Anwar al-Sādāt. Yet it was an organizationally unintegrated movement with hidden differences and organizational formations. These organizations were characterized by a low level of inter-organizational cooperation and appeared as a manifestation of small group politics within the context of increasingly popular social grievances. Also, as a counterculture movement reflecting the revulsion of university students and urban professional classes to the organization of modern life in Egypt, the Islamic current was an identity-seeking political movement composed of young radicals and older conservatives (Auda 1994; Podeh 1998). The young radicals constituted the core of the movement. They became involved with ideas and concepts aimed at the total reconstruction of the state, society, and world along the lines of “pure” Islam. This task entailed recreating the conditions that would make each of these spheres safe for Islam as it was perceived and conducted during the time of the Prophet Mohammed and his four successors (al-khilāfa). The quest to restore the past through insulating themselves from society and assaulting the state made these youth radical fundamentalists (Auda 1994). As for the conservative, they formed basically two groups. The MB represented the first. Its quest was reform based on the teachings of Islam, as mediated by Hasan al-Banna, with emphasis on the reconversion of individuals to Islam. By contrast, the second group was composed of al-Azhar’s shaykh (Islamic authority), Islamic traditionalists and modern Islamists. This group espoused a host of diverse ideas about how to make Islam influential in shaping the lives of

Egyptians. What bound these conservatives together was the inclination to be affiliated with the state at large as well as their dependence on political bureaucratic methods for spreading their ideas. Moreover, they, like the radicals, naturally maintained transnational links with other Islamists. All major organizations, in fact, sought followers outside as well as inside national boundaries, although their interests were domestic (Auda 1994, 376; Davidson 1998).

#### Rough Sketch of Moderate Political Islam History

Egyptian Political Islam has always been about anti-colonial or anti-governmental movements (except for state-authorized Islam such as al-Azhar, and a few years of religious liberalization under Sadat in the early 1970s) since its first mass-revolt in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. For a century, rulers in Egypt have often fought or compromised with the resurgence of Islam that has significantly challenged the state and its ruling elites. Contemporary Political Islam in its origins and manifestations has strong roots in the Egyptian experience. This experience has had a regional, and international impact on transnational Islam and on the West (Esposito and Voll 1996). Therefore, although the MB is usually cited as a symbol of global Political Islam, it is rather a creature of nationalism.

Historically, coming under British occupation in 1882, Egypt gave rise to the Islamic Modernists in the late 19th century. Its leading figure was Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī (1836-1897), who stayed in Egypt for eight years and called upon Egyptians to fight against imperialism, which had devastated Muslim countries and societies. He advocated modernization of the country and the adoption of Western science and technology. However, their power was not strong enough to overthrow the Egyptian monarchy that was tied with Great Britain (Kosugi 1998).

Under such circumstances, the MB was born as a reformist movement in 1928. An Egyptian school teacher Hasan al-Bannā (1906 – 1949) founded it in Isma'iliyya as a response to imperialism, colonialism, and the moral-hazard of Islam in Egypt (Kosugi et al. 1988, 3). In its history, the MB has provided ideological and organizational models for the growth and development of Islamic movements from around the Muslim world, from North Africa to Southeast Asia. Islamists in Algeria,

Sudan, the Gulf region, South and Southeast Asia acknowledge the formative influence of the MB, in particular of al-Bannā and Sayyid Qutb (1906 – 1966). In spite of its Islamic idea and conservativeness, the MB cooperated with Free Officers to oust the monarchy prior to the 1952 Revolution. However, once Nāsir and his colleagues were in power, the MB began to feel that their outlook was too secular. Basically, the Muslim guided state the MB sought was not the same as the basic vision of military officers such as Nasser. It also protested the state's interference in the affairs of al-Azhar for allegedly political purposes. After an attempt on the life of Nāsir by an unidentified assassin (believed to be a dissolved MB secret apparatus) in October 1954, Nāsir began attempts to once and for all crush the MB (Davidson 1998). Such severe circumstances made some MB members more conservative and radical. A steadfast minority of younger MB members rallied behind the radical views of chief ideologue Sayyid Qutb (later imprisoned and executed in 1966 under the Nāsir regime). In his book *Landmarks on the Road*, Qutb stated that the contemporary Egyptian regime and Westernized state and society were sinfully disgusting and unredeemable. He called these conditions as al-jāhiliya (pre-Islamic age). For him, all present conditions had to be destroyed to pave the way for a truly Islamic order (Ibrahim 1999).

Although Nāsir's attitude toward the movement was antagonistic and unfriendly, his pronouncements after Egypt's military defeat in the Six-Day War increasingly created an aura of religious fervor. Religious activities were encouraged and hundreds of the MB members were released from prison. As if to provide an explanation of the defeat by Israel, Nāsir resorted to Islamic slogans in his addresses to the masses. Egypt's military weakness had created rich ground for the growth of religious ideals because the defeat was seen as a punishment for Egypt's pursuit of socialist, rather than Islamic ideals. In the defeatist postwar climate, Islamist groups presented a religious alternative to Nāsir's secular, socialist political style (Sullivan and Kotob 1999).

As noted above, it is true that some MB members became involved in violent practices in its early history. However, despite the fact that their slogan is "Islam is the solution" and its manifest destiny is an Islamization of Egypt, it was able to enjoy large support from secularists (including some socialists) because its political-social

activities have been more effective than those of the government (Auda 1994; Sullivan and Kotob 1999). In the 1980s, the MB succeeded in reforming its patriarchal-organization to a more modern one. As a result of the continuous changes of the Electoral Law from 1977 to 1984, the MB was able to participate in the 1984 and the 1987 national elections (despite the law prohibiting religion-based parties and candidates) and gained enough voices in the lower house. Throughout the 1980s and the early 1990s, the MB emerged as a major force in the PAs, a pillar of Egyptian civil society (Ibrahim 1999). The electoral strength of the MB has come not only from hardcore dedicated followers but also from the fact that it is the most credible and effective alternative to the current government (Esposito 1999; Ibrahim 1996; Zaki 1995).

#### Rough Sketch of Radical Islamist History

Contrary to the moderate mainstream MB movement, the new, younger “radical” Islamists pursued a course of violent confrontation with the state, a course that has been the center of attention nationally and internationally since the mid 1970s. Most of these radicals have been splinters of the MB (Ibrahim 1999; Weaver 1999). Such radicals are often organized into cells called *usra* (families), which offer a sense of community and a new feeling of hope. These groups represent the radical jihad tendency in Political Islam in Egypt. Chief among them were the Islamic Liberation Party and *al-Takfir wa al-Hijra* (the Apostasy and the Flight) in the 1970s and the two major cell groups that have proliferated since the 1980s, *al-Jihād* (the Holy War) and *al-Jamā'a al-Islāmīya* (the Islamic Group) (Podeh 1998). They have forsworn the MB because of its compromises and accommodation with the Egyptian government. It has accused the state and society of being un-Islamic and living in conditions of *jāhiliya* and declared *jihād* as a means to bring about an Islamic transformation in accord with their rigid religious interpretation. Thus, all these radicals are against the post 1952 revolution state because they believe such a secularized state is inimical to Islam. Ironically, these radicals are themselves the product of the Nasserist policies of open, free education, egalitarianism, and high job expectations (Auda 1994; Esposito and Voll 1996).

The intellectual fountainhead and inspiration of the radical Political Islam was Sayyid Qutb, the chief ideologue of the MB in the 1960s. In the same vein, al-Takfir wa al-Hijra, led by the former MB member Shuki Mustafa, declared that the Egyptian state and society were infested by jāhiliya, which would require a complete moral overhauling to bring about a true Muslim society. To achieve this, the group called for hijra by atom of true believers to the desert and mountains to build a model of Muslim community that could grow and ultimately lead to a victorious struggle against jāhiliya society, especially the Egyptian government (Weaver 1999). The group had a violent showdown with the authorities in July 1977 subsequent to the kidnapping and killing of a former minister of al-awaqf (religious endowments), Sheikh Mohammed Hussein al-Dhahabi, a leading member of the official 'ulamā'. Many of these radicals were killed or tortured by the security police, and the top leaders, including Shuki Mustafa, were executed in 1978. One can surmise that the group's actions manifest its rejection of and hostility to the state-authorized ulama, whom they termed 'ulamā' al-sulta (ulama who are slavish to the government) (Faksh 1997, 47-48).

Similarly, the Islamic Liberation Party and the successor groups of al-Jihād and its ideological associate, al-Jamā'a al-Islāmīya saw the prevalent corruption and decadence of society as rooted in its ruling elite. To destroy the jāhiliya society, the elite would have to be transformed into an Islamic leadership that applied sharī'a. The transformation would be carried out not by peaceful means such as religious education and moral uplifting, but by direct action and open confrontation, or in other words, an all-out jihād. In his ideological tract al-Farida al-Gha'iba (the Absent Commandment), Muhammad Abdul Salam Farag, the leader of al-Jihād in 1979, pronounced the government to be apostate and an entity to be fought through holy war by believers, thus, a return to jihād was the only way to redemption (Auda 1994). The violent and aggressive stance of these groups brought them into open conflict with the state. As part of a coup, the conflict started with the bloody attempted takeover of the Technical Military Academy of Egypt in April 1974 by the Islamic Liberation Party. This was followed by the assassination of Sadat in October 1981 by members of al-Jihād (Fandy 1994).

The assassination of Sadat and the abortive radical Islamist revolt that followed

in the city of Assyut in al-Sa'id (upper Egypt) shook the Egyptian state to its foundation. Al-Sa'id, a predominantly rural, traditional, religious, and poor part of Egypt is the hotbed of the militant al-Jamā'a al-Islāmīya, which spearheaded the sanguinary uprising. In fact, the extremism of al-Jamā'a al-Islāmīya is heavily conditioned by its southern circumstances such as, "economic impoverishment and deeply rooted traditions (tha'r; revenge, hence to replace the power of the law) (Fandy 1994, 609-614)." After a brief period following Mubarak's accession and an initial attempt at dialogue, the acts of violence were ongoing in the second half of the 1980s and escalated in the post-Gulf War period of the 1990s. Led by al-Jamā'a al-Islāmīya and al-Jihād, radicals killed top government officials and security officers, members of the Coptic-Christian minority, secular writers, and foreign tourists in a relentless murderous cycle (Weaver 1999). Equally important, the power of the Islamic militants flourished with the creation of Islamized zones, chipping away at the domination of the state. These radicals grew so strong as to be able to control whole poor neighborhoods in Cairo such as Imbaba, 'Ein Shams, al-Zawiya al-Hamra, Umraniyya, and small towns and villages in al-Sa'id, such as al-Fayyum, al-Minya, and Dayrut (Podeh 1998). They had become virtually the principal domestic power in these geographic places, imposing their own social and moral code while running their own mosques with their own preachers they provided basic social welfare services and, "setting disputes and applying Qur'anic sanctions, completely outside governmental authority (Faksh 1997, 49-50)." On this matter, these radical movements can be seen as substate-national movements rather than as Political Islam. In this realm, the government's presence has been hard to detect. These Islamized spaces not only were moral puritan enclaves representative of the ideal future society, but also provided competing networks of social and economic support services that rivaled and even replaced the inefficient government system. These Islamic strongholds have witnessed repeated violent clashes with security forces since 1987 (Fandy 1994; Faksh 1997).

At present it is difficult to conceive radical Islamists such as al-Jamā'a al-Islāmīya and al-Jihād taking power in Egypt. These movements lack social and material infrastructure, mass support of Egyptian civil society, and a leader with charisma such as Khomeynī or the ability of Sudan's Hasan al-Turabī. These radicals



also suffer from organizational problems. Their loose, de-centralized structure helps in recruiting and in creating new leaders, but it also encourages strong personalities to form within their own groups. There still seems to be conflict between expatriate remnants of al-Jihād who want to concentrate on assassinating key regime fighters and activists inside Egypt who might be amenable to an accommodation with the authorities that would ease the burden of repression. The nail bombs most likely have been intended to sabotage any deal with the government. Tensions have on occasion led to deadly shootouts among the groups. As a result of the government's severe counterattacks, the radical Islamists have gradually lost their power. Interior Minister Habib Adly said in an interview with *The Washington Post* that the organizations largely behind the violence, al-Jamā'a al-Islāmīya and al-Jihād, have "lost their public base, lost their unity, lost a lot of their sources of finance (*The Washington Post* 24 June 1999)." In fact, the government has steadily released thousands of Islamist prisoners. Virtually all of them, according to Adly, underwent religious counseling in jail and satisfied officials that they had adopted more temperate views. In addition, the leadership and governing council of al-Jamā'a al-Islāmīya announced in the spring of 1999, that it would give up armed struggle (Ibid).

On the other hand, Political Islam is still on the rise among common people in Egypt. Cairo's atmosphere has also changed over the decades. Today, one frequently encounters females in full traditional Islamic garb, including veils, and a majority of females cover their hair in public. The bounds of what is permissible in literature and scholarship have become very conservative. Books by Farag Fouda, a secularist writer who was assassinated by al-Gama'at al-Islamiyya in 1992, and other works deemed offensive to Islamic morals were barred from display at the 1992 Cairo book fair (Ibrahim 1996). Most Egyptians not due to some inevitable return to traditionalism long seek such phenomenon. In fact, Islam is not necessarily "resurgent" in Egypt. It has been maintained for centuries as the dominant factor in Egyptian society. An Egyptian sociologist Saad Eddin Ibrahim asserted in an interview with the *Financial Times* that, "Every generation had a cause. Now there's no cause, people are looking for Islam...There's a hungry to give the young generation a new way (Huband 1999)." Fouad Ajami's explanation on Political Islam is also acceptable to Egypt's case,

“The Resurgence of Islam are so powerfully evocative that they make us lose sight of the real struggles that are engaged in...People summon the spirits of the past to help them achieve very precise goals...In some cases, the spirit are summoned simply because people are trying to find something with which to combat remote, smug, or operative state elites. The balance between state and society has been fundamentally disrupted in the Arab-Muslim order. The popular culture finds no more effective weapon of resistance than Islam (Ajami 1981, 177-178).”

Many intellectuals deplore the Islamic trend because it threatens to stop their freedom and does not seem to offer useful answers to Egypt's problems. Moreover, they are now asking whether it will dominate Egyptian politics as Arab Nationalism did in the 1950s and 1960s. While they find Mubārak uninspiring, they nevertheless, side with him against radical Islamists as the lesser of two evils. Equally adept in the strategy of containment, the government at the outset camouflaged itself in the mantle of Islam to appease the general public's religious sentiments and to enlist official ulama support. Indeed, because the grip of Islam at the popular level remains strong in Egypt, it has often been used by the state against opponents of the right and of the left – which has become a universal practice in the Muslim World, with governments of all manner of ideological conversion resorting to it. Nasīr invoked Islam to equate socialism and nationalism with Muslim egalitarianism and strength. Nasīr's twin policies had to be given an Islamic outfit to gain popularity and status among the masses. Sādāt consistently promoted the image of the pious Muslim and used Islam to battle secular leftists and validate his peace policies with Israel. Now, under Mubārak, the aim is to flourish state-supported Islam to combat radical Islamists (Faksh 1997; Moustafa 2000).

### Conclusion: Rough Prospects of Egypt's Political Islam

Political Islam in Egypt as in much of the Muslim world, has not moved further away rather, it has rooted itself more deeply and spread throughout Egyptian society.

As noted in this essay, most Islamists' temporal interests are domestic not international. The variety, diversity, and opinions of Egypt have long been overshadowed by its equation with radical Islamist threats. The broader significance and impact of Islamists can be seen by the extent to which they have gained cultural legitimacy, have become part of mainstream Muslim life and society and are not solely members of marginalized and alienated groups. Secular institutions in Egypt are now challenged not by violent Islamically oriented counterparts that Confrontationalists argue but by moderate counterparts that provide much-needed educational and social services and underline the limitations and continued failures of the government. That is why the MB and other moderate activists have often become dominant voices in several numbers of PAs. The major accomplishment of moderate Islamists, and the source of their strength and credibility is the extent to which, motivated by religion as well as political, social, and economic considerations, it has created an alternative, and a normative order. For instance, the MB's alternative order provides an ideological worldview based on and legitimated by religion and an alternative social system of services that demonstrates the relevance and effectiveness of religion to social realities and problems. As a result, the Islamic factors are regarded as both an effective change agent and challenge or threat. Others, in particular the government and many elites see unauthorized moderate-Political Islam as an indirect critique of the government's failures, a challenge to its legitimacy, and a direct threat to the stability of the government and society.

Today, despite a good condition of moderation and cooperation within the framework of the system, moderate Islamists especially the MB are still mistrusted for continuing to chip away at the existing secular state institutions and to push for its Islamic agenda. In fact, since Sādāt's initial attempt at co-operation of the MB in the 1970s, the relationship between the MB and the state has remained tenuous. The MB never fully embraced the Sādāt and the Mubārak regime despite its decision to adhere to the legal rules set by the state thus, it could not identify completely with either regime. Nor did Sādāt or Mubārak feel comfortable enough to embrace the MB as a dependable ally, for their agendas are radically different. The MB remains committed to the goal of Islamization of the state and society; something it shares with radical

Islamists, although pursues it with nonconfrontational means. Therefore, however radical Islamists often interpret jihād as an armed struggle against the regime, the MB has chosen an alternative interpretation, that of an individual and collective resistance employing social justice and communication, so that an Islamic state will be built from the individual upward.

The reality of Egyptian society as indeed of many Muslim societies, today contributes to a climate in which the influence of Political Islam on sociopolitical development will increase rather than diminish. Egypt still continues to exist in a climate of socioeconomic crisis and cultural alienation in which many experience the failure of the state and of secular ideologies. The government and ruling elites or classes possess tenuous legitimacy in the face of mounting disillusionment and opposition, among whom the MB remains the most vocal, best organized, and most effective. Just resorting to repression, whatever its short-term gains, will only contribute to radicalization and long-term instability in Egypt. Recognizing moderate Islamists and other moderate secular opponents as an authorized party to compete in elections will help to legitimize the electoral process and promote the long-term political stability sought by the government. A democracy is better able to deal with oppositions, particularly because it does not include coercive actions that delegitimize its authority and encourage the instability it seeks to evade.

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