



at BROOKINGS

منتدى أمريكا والعالم الإسلامي
U.S.-ISLAMIC WORLD FORUM

DOHA, QATAR

Islamist Views of Reform

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Prepared for presentation at the U.S.-Islamic World Forum, Doha, Feb. 16-18, 2008

GOVERNANCE, RELIGION
AND POLITICS TASK FORCE

ISLAMIST VIEWS OF REFORM

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INTRODUCTION

Arab Islamist attitudes towards American reform initiatives have been trapped between a genuine desire for fundamental change and a deep distrust of American intentions. Cooperation, even on issues of shared concern, is blocked by hostility to American foreign policy and opposition to many of the cultural and political dimensions of a globalization often conflated with Americanization. American reform promotion, on the other hand, has often been overtly cast as a tool for combating Islamist movements, intentionally or unintentionally, fueling Islamist suspicions. It is striking, therefore, to note how much overlap there really is in the ideas about reform—especially political reform—articulated by moderate Islamist movements and Americans. Both advocate democracy and greater political freedoms, with Islamists of late defending a surprisingly liberal conception of the meaning of democracy. Both oppose radical Islamist groups and terrorism (even if for different reasons). Vast gulfs over cultural and social issues, deep disagreements on core foreign policy issues, intense mutual suspicions, and the fear on each side of the domestic political fallout of open dialogues have generally blocked any serious explorations of such common ground.

This essay attempts to lay out Islamist conceptions of reform in order to identify both the opportunities for, and obstacles to, finding common ground. It seeks a middle ground between skeptics and advocates of moderate Islamism: not placing too much emphasis on the differences, since this renders dialogue impossible (which for many on both sides is the point), but also not papering over the very real points of disagreement. Efforts at

dialogue which sidestep core doubts and conflicts are as unlikely to produce meaningful results as are efforts which begun from the presumption of a mutual existential conflict.¹

I begin from the assumption that serious reform which does not take into account the demonstrated political and social power of moderate Islamist movements, will likely fail. While many in the West would prefer to nurture the growth of Arab and Muslim liberals or secularists, they generally have very limited political weight. For the foreseeable future, any serious reform projects must take into account the realities of Islamist electoral prowess and presence in today's Arab political sphere. This year's electoral failures of the Jordanian IAF and the Moroccan PJD, along with the disastrous performance of the Hamas government in Palestine, triggered a bout of speculation on the decline of Islamism. These setbacks arguably say more about renewed regime domination of the political process than about Islamists. The one notable exception to the trend conspicuously comes from non-Arab Turkey, where the mildly Islamist AKP won a renewed electoral mandate without triggering American hostility, an outcome which has intrigued Arab Islamists. Tunisian Islamist Rachid Ghanouchi argues in opposition to the "Islamist decline" thesis that everywhere you look, Islamic identification is growing and the Islamist project is succeeding, regardless of what the polls might say.² For better or for worse, Islamist movements remain the most potent force in Arab politics today. As Jordanian journalist Yasir Abu Hilala puts it, despite all their setbacks and struggles, "it is not possible for political reform to advance one step without the support of the Islamist movements."³

¹ For examples of attempts at such a dialogue, see Marc Lynch, "Brothers in Arms: How to Talk to America," *Foreign Policy* (September/October 2007), pp.70-74; Robert Leiken and Steven Brooke, "The Moderate Muslim Brotherhood," *Foreign Affairs*; Mona Yaquoubian, "Engaging Islamists and Promoting Democracy," USIP Special Report 190 (August 2007).

² Rachid Ghanouchi, "Is Islamism In Decline?" *al-Jazeera*, December 11, 2007 <http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/053ED511-2207-40E9-A414-E1D31CA3BF32.htm>; for the Islamist decline thesis, see Khalil el-Anani, "The Autumn of the Arab Islamists," *Daily Star*, December 4, 2007.

³ Yasir Abu Hilala, "Learning From the Experience of the Jordanian Islamists." *Al-Ghad*, December 16, 2007 (<http://www.alghad.jo/?article=7763>)



Grappling with Islamist views of reform requires understanding the complexity and diversity of Islamist politics today. Moderate Islamists face challenges from multiple directions. Liberal and nationalist activists compete and in some cases form coalitions. Moderate Islamists face a radical critique articulated by al-Qaeda and other “salafijihadists,” who accuse them of selling out their convictions for little practical gain and legitimizing un-Islamic governments. They struggle to capture the mantle of reform from Arab governments, which, with varying degrees of success, present themselves to Western audiences as reformers. And they are generally themselves internally divided over strategy and priorities.

I argue that moderate Islamists have demonstrated a commitment to the democratic process far more convincingly than is usually recognized. Whether facing a welcoming environment or a hostile one, Islamist movements have participated in elections to the fullest of their ability. A lengthy succession of policy documents, platforms, and reform documents testify to a well-articulated embrace of most of the key concepts of political democracy. What is more, Islamist movements have remained committed to electoral participation even where they have incurred heavy costs by doing so. At the level of both discourse and practice, it is difficult to imagine what more Islamist movements could do to affirm their democratic commitments.

At the same time, two serious challenges stand in the way of Americans and Islamists finding common ground on reform.

First, despite their democratic commitments, Islamists advance a deeply conservative view of social and cultural issues which is anathema to many (but certainly not all) in the West. Many Islamists define “reform” as a response to a comprehensive corruption of individuals, society, and the state. Democracy is the appropriate cure for the corruption of a political system which has lost accountability, in which the people have no voice or genuine rights. However, this does not translate into support for a Western-style limited state: in the economic realm, corruption is carried by neo-liberal reforms which leave the national economy defenseless before the global economy and neo-imperialist

designs, and which corrupt society by fueling conspicuous consumption, a growing gap between rich and poor, and a culture of materialism. Finally, reform in the social and cultural must be defended against the claimed corrosive and corrupting effects of Westernization.

This common thread helps explain why these Islamists see no real contradiction between their support for political democracy, and their culturally conservative mission. But for Western critics, this is indeed a contradiction. Few Islamists have foresworn the use of state power to advance their vision of Islamic morality—whether in the schools, the media, or public life. While Muslim Brotherhood leaders regularly invoke their commitment to the non-coercive approach of former Supreme Guide Hassan Hidaybi’s *Preachers Not Judges*, in practice the Brotherhood has rarely stood up in public against more radical Islamists practicing *takfir* (declaring a Muslim to be an apostate) or filing ‘*hisba*’ cases in the courts.⁴ Islamist enthusiasm for censorship and taste for “culture wars” also frighten many non-Islamist Arabs and Muslims.

Second, Islamist fears of American hegemonic aspirations and American suspicions of even moderate Islamists have thus far overwhelmed any potential for achieving common ground. Most Islamist movements share a deep belief in the hostility of an American foreign policy deemed to be overly supportive of Israel, and committed to dividing and weakening the Muslim world. From this vantage point, Islamists tend to be deeply suspicious of any American initiative, attributing malevolent intentions at every step. Despite all American protestations to the contrary, most see America’s war on terror as a comprehensive assault on Islam, from its charities and its schools to its political movements and its faith. Reform is therefore cast as something against the United States, not in cooperation with it towards shared goals. These views are widespread and deeply held—not only by Islamists—and every American policy proposal is filtered through this prism. For instance, in a 2007 survey by the University of Maryland’s Project on International Policy Attitudes, 92% of Egyptians thought that the United States probably or definitely had the goal of weakening and dividing the Muslim world, while 91% agreed with the goal of keeping Western values out of Muslim countries.⁵

⁴ For a recent discussion of *Preachers Not Judges*, see Barbara Zollner, “Prison Talk,” *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 2007

⁵ PIPA, “Muslims believe US wants to undermine Islam,” April 24, 2007.

Despite these obstacles, the potential common ground between American reform initiatives and Islamist preferences is significant. Both Islamists and the United States have consistently pushed for democracy, defined not only by free and fair elections, but also by greater public freedoms and respect for human rights and the rule of law. In most cases, moderate Islamists share with the United States an interest in combating extremist forms of Islamism—both because of doctrinal differences, and out of an organizational self-interest in preventing either overly intense regime response to terrorism, or a loss of members and potential recruits to more radical competitors.

INTRA-MUSLIM BATTLES OVER REFORM

Muslim Brotherhood ideas on reform must be understood in the context of the wider field of political contention, including the wider context of the “war on terror” and the radical Islamist challenge. Islamists competed on multiple fronts as they articulated reform agendas: against regimes (most of which today portray themselves as champions of reform), against secular reform movements, and against a radical Islamist trend. Their reform discourse was shaped by a general Arab public consensus in favor of reform, which they helped to shape but could not completely control. Al-Jazeera and the rapidly transforming Arab media helped to shape and to empower these public frustrations, shaping the political environment within which Islamists operated.⁶ American pressures for reform also helped, whether Islamists admitted it or not, by forcing Arab regimes to at least temporarily refrain from overtly massive repression, and to acknowledge rhetorically the importance of reforms. The sensitivity of Brotherhood reformists to this point may be exacerbated by the fact that they faced intense criticisms from more conservative members of their own organization, who accused them of ‘liberalism’ and of prioritizing pleasing the West over Islam.

Al-Qaeda and its intellectual supporters in the “salafi-jihadist milieu” offer their own vision of reform, one which is consistently articulated and advanced by both political leaders and intellectual supporters. For this salafi-jihadist position, “reform” occupies as central a position as it does for the Muslim Brotherhood or Western NGOs—but has an entirely different genealogy and meaning. “Reform” as understood here is stripped of all the institutional connections to democracy, civil society, and so forth which the Muslim Brotherhood adopts wholesale. These are dismissed as idolatry, the worshipping of gods other than God, and as part of the Western cultural invasion aimed at abolishing the true understanding of Islam. Instead, reform derives exclusively from an austere reading of *shari’a*, meant to bring society and politics back from the realm of *jahiliya* and into that of *hakimiya*.⁷

From this standpoint, al-Qaeda consistently attacked the Muslim Brotherhood for its willingness to take part in the political process. In line with his long-standing critique of the Brotherhood, Ayman al-Zawahiri biting-ly criticized the Brotherhood movements, from Egypt to Palestine, for participating in elections—what did they have to show for it, he demanded?⁸ How could such participation be reconciled with jihad? The road to reform must begin by striking the “Crusaders and Zionists” and their client regimes—the far enemy and the near enemy – since they are the real obstacles to reform.⁹ According to Zawahiri, peaceful protest and political action—no matter how well intentioned—can only lead to failure. Reformists erred by relying on Western concepts of reform, instead of relying on the true concepts of Islam.¹⁰ Reform for Zawahiri rested on the *hakimiya* of *shari’a*, on the freedom of Muslim lands from foreign domination, and the freedom of Muslims to choose their leaders. Their sharply contrasting visions of an ideal Islamic state is one vitally important reason why it is wrong to argue that radical and moderate Islamists are simply pursuing different approaches to the same ultimate goal.

⁶ For discussion of al-Jazeera’s coverage of American reform proposals, see Marc Lynch, “Anti-Americanisms in the Arab World,” in Peter Katzenstein and Robert Keohane, eds., *Anti-Americanisms in World Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 2006). Mohammed Abu Rumman argues that the MB followed the popular trend towards demanding reform rather than leading it, in *al-Ghad*, December 31, 2007

⁷ Zawahiri, al-Jazeera, June 17, 2005

⁸ Zawahiri’s book, *Bitter Harvest*, is something of the ur-text of contemporary radical Islamist critiques of the Brotherhood.

⁹ Zawahiri, June 4, 2007

¹⁰ Zawahiri, July 3, 2007



Al-Qaeda's critique challenged the Brotherhood and other moderate Islamists at two levels. The polemical arguments represented one of the most active and intense "wars of ideas" actually going on in the region. The challenge forced the Brotherhood to articulate and defend its conception of reform against a hostile Islamist skepticism—which it did across a wide range of media, in the press and on television and the internet, as well as in all sorts of face-to-face settings. But this was not just about ideas—it was (and continues to be) about battles over recruits, members and overall power within the Islamist milieu. As the Brotherhood found its democratic participation facing fierce regime repressions, it became harder for it to convince its own members—especially impatient youth—of the value of its own strategy. For the Brotherhood to play the role of "firewall" against radicalization, it needs to be able to demonstrate the viability of its moderate approach – a vital point which American policy should not forget.

MODERATE ISLAMIST VIEWS ON REFORM

"Everywhere you turn your face in any country in the lands of Islam, you find people talking about reform. Newspapers talk about reform, the radio and television and media talk about reform, the *ulema* and the intellectuals talk about reform...parties are established under the name Reform, conferences and dialogues and seminars all on behalf of reform...Even Americans who rule over the world call on us to reform...We must then know the definition of this reform to which we are called by forces inside and outside. Is there such a thing as reform, and is there a need for reform?"

"Changing something corrupt into something healthy, changing a corrupt person into a healthy person, or a corrupt society into a healthy society...this is reform."

—Yusuf al-Qaradawi,
"Reform", January 17, 2004.¹¹

The concept of "reform" has dominated moderate Islamist political discourse and mainstream public discourse over the last few years as much as it has Western visions for the Middle East. But as the influential Islamist al-Qaradawi noted sardonically in his 2004 address on reform, the concept of "reform" is not always clearly defined.¹² In his view, which reflects the mainstream of the Muslim Brotherhood's approach, reform's primary goal is to restore the integrity and health of the *umma*, which can only be achieved through comprehensive reform based on the principles of Islam. Reform, for al-Qaradawi, must come from within, beginning from changing the individual's ideas, conscience, faith, and beliefs. Without faith, there can be no rule of law, no ethics, and no real reform. Reform must come through democratic participation and a bottom-up approach to reform, since even a well-intentioned coup leader will inevitably turn to dictatorship and attempt to impose his will on society. While comprehensive reform must take place everywhere, from education to daily life, al-Qaradawi identifies political freedom as the first necessary step – because only then can people freely choose honest representatives and leaders. But political reforms can not be separated from economic and social reforms: all must go together in a comprehensive set of reforms.

Muslim Brotherhood literature devotes great attention to the concept of reform, rooting it in a reading of Hassan al-Banna's teachings.¹³ Reform has in particular been a top priority of Mohammed Mehdi Akef since he became Supreme Guide in early 2004. Like al-Qaradawi, Akef explains that comprehensive reform across all levels of politics and society is vital for the renaissance of Islam envisioned by the Brotherhood.¹⁴ Reform must begin with individual bodies and souls, bringing culture to minds and integrity to doctrines. Such faithful Muslims would then be in a position to guide society (*irshad*). But perfecting the individual is not enough, because the faithful individual requires an appropriate society and regime: "reforming the regime (*nizam*) is an indivisible part of general reform." The reform which the Brotherhood calls for, then, is necessarily an individual return to

¹¹ Qaradawi, "Reform", January 17, 2004 http://www.qaradawi.net/site/topics/article.asp?cu_no=2&item_no=3249&version=1&template_id=104&parent_id=15

¹² Abdullah Ali al-Alyan, "Why did talk of reform stop?" Al-Khaleej, December 25, 2007

¹³ For an interesting recent investigation of the roots of MB thinking, see Tareq al-Bishri, "Reading the writings of Hassan al-Banna, founder of the modern Islamist movement," *al-Quds al-Arabi*, October 26-29, 2007. Mohiya Hamed, "Reform jihad and sacrifice," Ikhwan Online, May 30, 2006

¹⁴ Weekly Message from the Supreme Guide, "Working in the path of reform," Ikhwan Online, April 28, 2005

God and an opening of the political system alike.¹⁵ But political reform comes first, including free elections and an end to emergency rule.

Even as political reform has become a top priority over the last few years, the Muslim Brotherhood consistently and “completely rejects any foreign pressure or interference.”¹⁶ Akef argues that genuine reform must always come from within, from a people with an interest in change – which is why the educational and *da’wa* (outreach) mission was so essential, to guide people to understand their interests in this way. Al-Qaradawi similarly argues that reform must come from within: Americans cannot reform us, nor can any external power, since only a people can reform itself, based on its own principles and convictions. Even though he had just issued a path-breaking “reform document” in March of 2004, Akef rejected using that summer’s Greater Middle East Initiative and all other American and European reform projects to pressure regimes in that direction. In his view, the West did not desire genuine reform, and such support would only come at the price of concessions on the core issues of the Islamic *umma* (Palestine, Iraq, et. al.).¹⁷ Brotherhood writers state bluntly that Western concepts of reform want only to increase the corruption and sickness, not heal it.¹⁸ The influential independent Islamist judge Tareq el-Bishri shared this view: reform must be a local product.¹⁹ In a widely discussed al-Jazeera talk show, the moderate Islamist Fahmy Howeydi also took this position: where Saad Eddin Ibrahim urged Arabs to take help where they could get it, even from Washington, Howeydi warned that the United States would always let Arabs down because their interests fundamentally diverged.²⁰ When Americans explicitly justified their reform strategies in terms of combating Islamism, it is difficult to see why they would have thought otherwise.

The Islamist response to educational reform proposals is particularly instructive here. Many in the West see this as an important but essentially apolitical form of assistance, improving education and better preparing Arabs and Muslims for a globalized world—along with, in some cases, offering an alternative to ‘radical *madrasas*’ (even though failing, overcrowded public schools are by far the larger problem in many Arab countries). To Islamists, however, this educational reform represents a direct attack on Muslim identity and faith, and is the farthest thing from being apolitical. A deep concern with education as the foundational point for individual development is one reason that the Muslim Brotherhood has long sought control over Education Ministries.²¹ Indeed, one of Hassan al-Banna’s very first pamphlets in 1929 focused on education.²² Modernized instruction curricula are frequently seen as an attempt to impose Westernization and obliterate the Arabic language and the Islamic faith – even as the Brotherhood calls for deep reforms of the educational system which in practice might look little different from American ideas.²³

POLITICS AND THE DA’WA: WHAT IS THE OBJECT OF REFORM?

The Muslim Brotherhood and like-minded moderate Islamist movements have demonstrated a commitment to the political process which clearly goes beyond tactical concerns. They have contested elections across the region not only in the face of both strong external pressure to desist, but also despite a potent internal Islamist critique of their participation. For instance, over the last several years influential Islamists such as Abdullah al-Nefissi and Mohammed Selim al-Awa have urged the Brotherhood to pull back from the political game, where the costs are too high and too little can be gained in the face of a hostile and repressive regime.²⁴ Such arguments would

¹⁵ “Akef: the MB’s reform is a return to God,” Ikhwan Online, September 25, 2004

¹⁶ Essam el-Erian, “The Muslim Brotherhood and Reform in Egypt,” *al-Abram*, March 17, 2004, accessed on Ikhwan Online, April 8, 2004

¹⁷ Weekly message from the Supreme Guide, Ikhwan Online, June 17, 2004

¹⁸ For example, Tawfiq al-Wa’ai, “Counterfeit reform,” Ikhwan Online, June 29, 2004

¹⁹ Tareq el-Bishri, “Reform is a local product,” *al-Araby 960*, May 22, 2005

²⁰ Open Dialogue, GET DATE

²¹ Education, Politics, and Religious Transformation in Egypt (University of California Press 1998)

²² Johannes J. G. Jansen, “Hasan al-Banna’s Earliest Pamphlet” *Die Welt des Islams*, 32, 2 (1992), pp. 254-258

²³ Ebtisam Al Kitbi, “Gulf States: Educational Reform’s Real Goals” *Arab Reform Bulletin* 4, no.4 (May 2006)

²⁴ Al-Awa, www.islamonline.net, on May 27, 2007. Also see Rafik Habib, “Islamists and politics: marriage or divorce” *Al-Mesryoon*, August 7, 2007; see response by Essam Abd al-Aziz, *Al-Mesryoon*, August 11, 2007

have easily provided intellectual and political cover for the Brotherhood to retrench. But as of now, it remains determined to contest the political realm—suggesting a strategic, rather than tactical, commitment.

Muslim Brotherhood leaders explain that they see political participation as an indivisible part of the *da'wa*.²⁵ The ultimate objective of politics is to advance the project of deepening the faith of the believers, and create an authentically Muslim life and society. Abd al-Monem Said (a member of the NDP Policy Bureau) states that this religious objective renders them inherently unable to be true democrats: moderate rhetoric masks “an intention to implement religious tyranny.”²⁶ He argues that their focus on creating “faithful men” requires a totalitarian control of all means of socialization (from schools to the media). Their participation in politics thus takes on a sinister hue, since what other than this fascist impulse could explain their hopeless efforts to intrude on the electoral arena? While this identifies a real tension in Islamist political and social thought, it seems to overstate the case rather dramatically. The depiction of this conception of politics as *da'wa* as something sinister make little sense: parties and candidates around the world have always pursued seemingly hopeless electoral campaigns for precisely those reasons.

That said, the relationship between politics and *da'wa* has emerged as a central point of contention inside the Brotherhood itself.²⁷ The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood today seems internally divided, with sharp conflicts between reformers and traditionalists increasingly fought in public, rather than behind closed doors.²⁸ The current, dominant vision links the two by arguing that desired reforms are best pursued with Parliamentary representation. Even without winning elections, the campaigns themselves provide an opportunity to get their message out to the people, and to make their ideas and their members known in society. But other,

more traditional activists have argued that the political approach distracts from the mission of *da'wa*—an argument which has gained traction as the regime has cracked down hard against the Brotherhood's political mobilization.²⁹

Arab Islamist movements have generally focused on participation rather than winning, as a way of reassuring both regimes and the West.³⁰ But this has created a form of moral hazard in their political thought and practice, leaving them free to take positions without thought as to implementation. It has also left them, according to many critics, without serious ideas about how to govern should they actually win, a charge leveled after the Hamas victory (somewhat unfairly, given the conditions of boycott and internal strife which followed).³¹ The Muslim Brotherhood has issued a series of reform documents and electoral platforms to respond to such criticisms, almost always under the banner of ‘reform,’ to which I now turn.

PARTY PLATFORMS AND REFORM DOCUMENTS

The proliferation over the last few years of official documents explaining the Islamist stance on reform is a remarkable development, the novelty of which is often overlooked. In March 2004, Akef authorized the release of a path-breaking reform document (which the Brotherhood considered profoundly liberal, and its critics denounced as a platform for an Islamic fascist state). In 2005, the Brotherhood's Parliamentary election platform and campaign outlined a systematic view of reform. In 2007, it released an updated electoral platform for Senate elections. Later in 2007, it released a preliminary draft of a Political Party Platform.³² Jordan's Islamic Action Front also released a series of reform documents and electoral platforms focused on reform. What do these documents say about the current Islamist conception of reform?

²⁵ Essam el-Erian: “political action is our path to reform”, Islam Online, June 10, 2007; personal interview with Mohamed Habib, October 5, 2007

²⁶ Abdel Monem Said Aly, “Understanding the Muslim Brothers in Egypt”, Crown Center Middle East Brief (December 2007).

²⁷ Mohamed Abu Rumman, “Islamists and the value of the political game”, Islam Today, August 20, 2007; Hossam Tamam, “Transformations of the Muslim Brotherhood”, available at www.islamismscope.com/index.php?art/id:250

²⁸ Marc Lynch, “Young Brothers in Cyberspace,” Middle East Report 245 (2007); Khalil al-Anani, “Four generations of Muslim Brothers”, *al-Hayat*, December 8, 2007

²⁹ For examples of this vast literature: Amru Shoukbi, “Da'wa group and political organization,” *Al-Masry al-Youm*, October 25, 2007;

³⁰ Mohamed Abu Rumman, *al-Ghad*, October 8, 2007.

³¹ Saad Eddin Ibrahim, “Do Islamists fail in power?” *Al-Masry al-Youm*, October xx, 2007

³² All references to the platform here are to the “First Read” text, given to me by Deputy Supreme Guide Mohammed Habib in Cairo, October 5, 2007. The discussion is informed by my interviews with most of the Brotherhood's leadership and a number of activists and independent analysts in early October 2007.

As the most recent and most comprehensive in a long line of Muslim Brotherhood statements on reform, the draft political party platform of 2007 deserves close attention.³³ To this point, most attention has focused on a few controversial portions of the platform while neglecting the 128 other pages: its rejection of the idea of a non-Muslim or woman serving as head of state, and—especially—on its proposal of a Council of Ulema with a legislative role. Critics of the Ikhwan seized upon these points to paint a portrait of an organization revealing its true, non-democratic face, with Abd el-Monem Said charging it with being a blueprint for an Iranian-style theocratic state. Even important Brotherhood members such as Abd al-Monem Abou el-Fattouh, Gamal Hishmet, and Essam el-Erian criticized some of the ideas. Defenders of the Platform were at pains to point out that the proposed Committee would have only an advisory role, and that the Platform clearly and strongly affirmed that legislation must emanate from a freely and honestly elected Parliament. An internal review of it is ongoing, and it is not yet clear whether they will remain in the final draft.

What is clear, however, is that those points have overshadowed the platform's systematic and coherent argument for a relatively liberal set of political freedoms and democratic institutions. The overwhelming content of the parts devoted to political reform lay out a sustained argument for political freedoms and democratic integrity which differ little from a Western, democratic vision. The Platform endorses in no uncertain terms virtually every aspect of Western-style democracy: citizenship (2.1.a), separation of powers (2.2.2), a civil and technocratic state (2.1.e), political pluralism (2.2.5), civil society (2.2.1.c), human rights, constitutionalism (2.1.b), rule of law (2.1.d), mass political participation (2.2.1.a), transparency and freedom of information (2.2.3), and free and fair elections (2.2.7). Even the controversial Higher Ulema Council was placed in an advisory role to a democratically elected and sovereign Parliament.

The Platform emphasizes “reform” at every juncture. Part one's opening section, which lays out the core concepts of the platform to follow, begins by emphasizing

that *shari'a* must be the main source of legislation (not “the only source,” as advocated by harder-line Islamists) and that *shura* (consultation) is the essence of democracy. The third article (1.1.3) then describes “comprehensive reform” as the demand of every Egyptian, Arab and Muslim. Political and constitutional reforms are presented as the starting point for achieving all other areas of reform. It rejects the conception of reform as initiated by the government, instead claiming the mantle of reform for all people and movements. The concept of reform which follows (1.1.6) clearly harkens back to the core teachings of Hassan al-Banna: the goal of development has to be the individual citizen, who in turn becomes the core agent of reform. Justice, equality and freedom are the primary aspirations throughout.

The second article, “Goals,” offers a telling juxtaposition of the liberalism and conservatism of the Platform. The first paragraph (1.2.1) lays out a deeply liberal vision of political reform: unleashing public freedoms, especially the right to form political parties and civil society institutions, the principle of rotation of power, freedom and transparency, the right of people to choose their leaders. But the next paragraph (1.2.2) points in the opposite direction: spreading and deepening morals and ethics and true understanding of Islam. The tension between the political liberalism and social conservatism of these two adjoining paragraphs captures much of what Western observers find troubling about the Brotherhood. The concept of “guidance” runs through the document, a conception of those with the truth guiding the rest which sitting uneasily alongside the celebration of dialogue and pluralism.

The economic platform leans towards economic nationalism and protectionism, interlacing a domestic critique of the Mubarak regime's crony capitalism with an international critique of American-style neo-liberalism (see section 4). On cultural (section 6) and social (section 5) issues, the Platform is predictably the most conservative and the most Islamic. Where the political chapter calls for a liberal, pluralist state, the cultural and social chapters propose a much more interventionist state with a clear goal of promoting Islamic morality in terms

³³ Mona al-Ghobashy, “The Metamorphosis of the Egyptian Muslim Brothers,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 37 (2005), 373-395; “Reforming Egypt”, International Crisis Group Report No. 46, 4 October 2005; Amr Hamzawy, “Egypt: Regression in the Muslim Brotherhood's Party Platform?” Arab Reform Bulletin, October 2007.

defined by the Brotherhood. Reform here primarily refers to overcoming what the Platform considers to be a pervasive corruption of public life and deterioration of ethical standards. The Platform sees the media as a malevolent force corrupting society, and endorses an interventionist state to guide the media and filter out immoral messages and images—again, in sharp contrast with its political liberalism.

The section on education is similarly oriented towards moral guidance; although it also includes a range of very practical criticisms of Egypt's creaking educational system (see section 3.1). It makes clear from the preamble of section 3 that the purpose of educational reform is "to deepen Arab and Islamic identity and strengthen belonging (<http://www.musharrafmovie.com/intima>)."

It simultaneously urges greater technical and scientific education as crucial to development, placing it far from any endorsement of "madrasas" focusing on Qur'anic education. The platform offers a lengthy, highly detailed and well-thought out set of principles for educational reform, suggesting the importance of the topic to the Brotherhood.

At the same time, an intense suspicion of and hostility towards American foreign policy runs through the document (see section 2.3). The opening preamble begins with an expression of resistance to American-Zionist hegemony, and the reform agenda is explicitly presented in opposition to—not in support of—American reform proposals. The Platform begins from the presumption of American bad faith, pointedly noting that American support for Mubarak and other Arab dictators is inconsistent with a genuine imperative to reform. Repeatedly throughout the chapters, one finds negative references to American concepts of reform, juxtaposed to the presumably superior Islamist alternative.

The same tension between political liberalism and social/cultural conservatism can be found in the reform documents and electoral platforms produced by Jordan's Muslim Brotherhood and Islamic Action Front.³⁴ It has long been more divided over core political issues than has the Egyptian MB, with the Palestinian issue and the

tortuous question of Jordanian-Palestinian relations at the heart of the conflict (along with the continuing repercussions of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's November 2005 terrorist attack in Amman and the ambiguous response of some Jordanian Islamists). As Nathan Brown points out, where the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood in the 1990s set the pace for Islamist movements in terms of political participation, it has stagnated and even regressed in recent years.³⁵ Jordanian liberals were particularly horrified in 2006 by the Islamist support for controversial changes to the media law – a conservative stance which seemed to starkly contradict its own platform.

The IAF's 2003 electoral platform begins with the blunt assertion that it considers a presence in the Parliament to be one of the political means to achieve the goal of "Islam is the Solution."³⁶ It calls for "freedom and *shura* and democracy," and for reform to stop the deterioration in the realm of public freedoms and *shura*, to limit administrative and financial and moral corruption. The first section demands specific political reforms: canceling changes to the constitution and revitalizing it as a guide to politics; issuing a new electoral law; issuing new laws governing municipalities to guarantee popular participation; objecting to the Palace's use of temporary laws when Parliament is not in session; preventing security forces from repressing citizens; and so on. The second section focuses on public freedoms and human rights. While it casts these as emanating from Islam, the specifics are again fairly standard: against torture, defending public freedoms for all citizens without exception, and supporting freedom of opinion and press.

While the first two sections could be adapted to almost any political party (as could the long section on the economy), Islamist or not, the same could not be said of the following sections, which a long series of recommendations on education, on cultural and media policies, on religious guidance, on social policy, and on women and youth. There, a much more conservative vision emerges in which morality and religious imperatives take precedence over liberal freedoms. Finally, the section on foreign policy begins with Palestine and presents a hard line against the "Zionist enemy." Israel looms far larger than

³⁴ See Jillian Schwedler, *Faith in Movement* (Cambridge University Press 2006).

³⁵ Nathan Brown, "Jordan and its Islamic Movement: The Limits of Inclusion," Carnegie, January 2006.

³⁶ Available at <http://jabha.net/body9.asp?field=LIB&id=5>. This was the most recent document available online.

does the United States in this section, in comparison to the Egyptian documents. But it concludes with a statement of resistance to “American-Zionist hegemony over the world,” and a call for Arab and Islamic unity.

While each Islamist movement has adapted to its particular domestic political context, the general patterns seen in the Egyptian and Jordanian cases seems to hold across the Arab world. Moderate Islamist parties have contested elections successfully wherever allowed, and have used their Parliamentary position to push their views of reform. Generally, they tend to be relatively liberal on political issues—demanding greater accountability and transparency, free elections and greater public freedoms, and respect for human rights—and quite conservative on social and cultural issues.³⁷

While this is beyond the scope of this essay, it is worth noting that the electoral success of Turkey’s AKP, and the West’s toleration for an Islamist government in that key ally, has both baffled and intrigued Arab Islamists. Many non-Islamist analysts in the Arab media were quick to reject any analogy between the Turkish and Arab experiences—probably because the prospect of a peaceful, elected, mass-based Islamist movement coming to power through elections is in many ways more threatening to the current Arab elite than is the radical terrorist challenge. Arab Islamists, for their part, have clearly been fascinated by the Turkish experience. How did the AKP win? Why did the West accept the victory? The prominent Brotherhood reformist Essam el-Erian argued that the first lesson was that Islamist movements could be integrated into political life without fear or doubts.³⁸ The AKP proved an able steward of the economy, did not impose Islamic doctrine on unwilling Turks, and has offered a powerful vision of a moderate, democratic Islamic movement. The differences, he argued, had to do with the regimes in question—no Arab country offered the free elections and political opportunities available in Turkey—and an American reception which differed so dramatically from its attitude towards Arab Islamists.

CONCLUSIONS

This overview of current Islamist thinking about reform leads to some important, if tentative, conclusions.

First, support for generic political freedoms is widespread and seemingly deeply held within MB movements. The documents discussed above share a consistent set of political commitments which have been matched both by political practice and by the rhetoric espoused by many MB leaders and intellectuals across multiple arenas. Reformists such as Abou el-Fattouh write frequently and in detail about the importance of democracy to the Islamist project.³⁹ Others suggest that while the Islamist commitment to democracy may be genuine, it also depends on the MB’s current reading of its interests and could easily change with conditions.⁴⁰ But this remains as conjectural as does the alternative view. For now, the evidence strongly supports the claim that the Brotherhood has embraced the language and practice of political democracy. Islamists have done as much as can be reasonably expected to prove their democratic credentials—certainly compared to manifestly authoritarian Arab regimes.

Second, the consensus in favor of political freedoms rarely extends to a deeper support for liberal social or even political stances. From a Western perspective, there is a deep tension between the Islamist desire to purify and police the public realm and its support for political freedoms. Islamists themselves generally do not see this tension, however, and see the political liberalism and the social conservatism as appropriate responses to a common challenge. According to a recent essay on the official MB website, Banna’s vision of reform was “comprehensive...working on the path of guiding the people to a social system which deals with all aspects of life under the name of Islam.”⁴¹ The manifest willingness of even moderate Islamists to use both state and social power to “guide” others to the true faith complicates their liberal political message. Americans prepared to engage with moderate Islamists must think through the implications of this duality.

³⁷ Nathan Brown, “Pushing Toward Party Politics? Kuwait’s Islamic Constitutional Party,” Carnegie Papers No. 79, January 2007; Jane Kinninmont, “Bahrain: Assessing al-Wafaq’s Parliamentary Experiment”, Arab Reform Bulletin, October 2007

³⁸ Essam el-Erian, “The Turkish AKP in Brotherhood eyes.” *Al-Hayat*, Oct 25, 2007; also see Erian’s “Is it possible that what happened in Turkey could happen in the Arab world,” *Al-Mesryoon*, July 30, 2007

³⁹ For example, Abd el-Monem Abou el-Fattouh, “Islam and the Democratic System,” Islam Online, December 27, 2007, and Saad al-Din al-‘Othamni (Secretary-General of Morocco’s Party for Justice and Development), “Religion and Politics: Distinction, not Separation,” Islam Online, January 8, 2007.

⁴⁰ <http://www.alghad.jo/?article=7669>, December 3, 2007

⁴¹ “Reform in the thought of Imam al-Banna.” Ikhwan Online, August 14, 2006.

Third, Islamists see a deep connection between internal reform and foreign policy. Their view of American proposals on reform is almost always deeply shaped by their views on American support for Israel, the “war on Islam,” Iraq, and so forth. This essay began by pointing to the near-universal Islamist belief in American ill-will. Most Islamists – and, indeed, most Arabs – believe that the United States does not genuinely want to bring democratic reforms to the Arab world. “America has primary responsibility for the fires burning through the region,” began one recent weekly letter from Mohammed Mehdi Akef.⁴² Perhaps America would like to see its client regimes and friendly dictators gain a more solid popular foundation, or a more palatable sheen of democratic trappings. But, from this perspective, the U.S. consistently prefers pro-American dictators to democracy and the status quo to genuine reform. The American response to the Hamas electoral victory, and to a lesser extent American silence in the face of the Egyptian crackdown following the Muslim Brotherhood’s Parliamentary electoral successes, stands as the final bill of indictment.

One final note, consider this recent, hotly controversial speech: “Freedom requires religion just as religion re-

quires freedom. Freedom opens the windows of the soul so that man can discover his most profound beliefs and commune with God. Freedom and religion endure together, or perish alone.” Were such words delivered by Mohammed Mehdi Akef, Supreme Guide of the Muslim Brotherhood, they would likely be taken as a clear signal of the impossibility of a genuine Islamist participation in democracy. But they were, of course, uttered by Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney in a highly publicized speech entitled “Faith in America.”⁴³ Too often, Islamist views of religion and politics are contrasted with an idealized liberal America, one which has not been wracked by decades of culture wars over abortion, gay marriage, or the meaning of “right to life.” But of course America itself has deep, unresolved questions about the proper role of religion in public life. Rather than simply pose the social conservatism of the Islamists as a toxin which necessarily renders their political liberalism irrelevant, Americans might think more carefully about precisely which parts of the socially conservative agenda are incompatible with democratic participation.

⁴² Akef, Ikhwan Online, July 5, 2007; for another of plentiful examples, Akef’s weekly letter of June 28, 2007: “America’s agenda”

⁴³ Delivered December 6, 2007. Available at http://www.mittromney.com/News/Speeches/Faith_In_America

