

# Political Trends in the Al Sharq Region after the Arab Uprisings: The Transformation of Political Islam in a Changing Regional Order

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The regional and international orders are currently in a process of reshaping amidst a concurrent and simultaneous crisis of liberal democracy and state institutions not only in the Middle East and North Africa region (MENA) but also in the West. There is a rightward move in the current global context marked by ultranationalism, xenophobia and distrust that manifests even among traditional allies like the United States (US), the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and European Union (EU). Alongside a crumbling Western-backed order in the MENA region, the foreign policies of the US, the UK and France are nebulous with unclear demarcations besides ostensible withdrawal or arms sales. This has resulted in a vacuum in the MENA region that has been increasingly occupied by new regional players with a perceived growing influence of Russia and China. The hardening of the alliance between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates and their rapprochement to Israel have maintained a hostile milieu towards political Islam movements (PIMs).

This roundtable meeting was complementary to an event held by Al Sharq Forum in February 2018, titled “ Political Trends after Arab uprisings: The Transformation of Political Islam in a Changing Regional (Dis-)Order”. This event, which brought together political Islam leaders, activists, and academics studying political Islam movements, aimed to map: the regional and international changes and the threats and opportunities they carry to PIMs in the MENA region and the institutional and ideological transformations as a response to (post-) Arab spring changing politics. There was also a special focus given to the debate about the effects of political exclusion on the dynamics of moderation of PIMs.

## **The Changing Approaches of Regional and International Actors**

### **Features of the new US foreign policy**

The US, under Trump's presidency, is marked to be increasingly behaving as a market actor across all of the state's functions. Trump's foreign policy towards the Middle East is animated by a market rationality that can be summarized by a "Pay me and I do" motto, as phrased by one participant. Besides, the finishing off of the Palestinian cause is of a primary foreign policy concern for Trump. An issue of disagreement between discussants was the notion commonly referred to as the US withdrawal from the MENA region. As argued, the US is actively driving the closure of the Palestinian cause and meanwhile providing support to Israel and the military-led regime in Cairo, and has ended the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action to pressure Iran out of Syria. However, there are peculiar features to the modus operandi of this policy: the US relationship with the region is being built on a person-to person basis rather than institution-to institution marked by an increasing role for social media, mainly Twitter, which is rendering this policy volatile, manipulable and unpredictable but equally, if not more, damaging.

### **Ascending Actors in the MENA region: Russia and China.**

After being excluded from the region in the aftermath of the Cold War, Russia re-entered the region as a powerful actor through Syria, following a sense of being double-crossed by the Western powers in Libya. Russia's intervention in the region is entirely and aggressively interest-driven with no useful objectives or strategies for the development of the region.

Domestically, the developments within Russia have been drifting further towards the right with Putin consolidating a strong authoritarian government. This reflects regionally in Russia's Islamophobic approach to Political Islam movements with the exception of Hamas considered by Russia as a bargaining chip, according to one participant. An alliance between Russia and Israel is growing at the expense of the Palestinians as Netanyahu increasingly finds Russia more useful in the Levant and is able to manage an alliance with both the US and Russia. As the Syrian war comes to an end, Russia will present as the primary challenge to be dealt with for Iran especially if Russia responds positively to a US offer to push Iran out of Syria in exchange for keeping Assad in power. Simultaneously, Turkey and Iran are driving closer to what might emerge as a wary alliance given that neither parties really trust each other. However, post-Syria they are expected to move closer towards each other.

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China is engaging in the MENA region much less militaristically than Russia, driven mainly by its own economic interests rather than political ideology or development-oriented regional agendas. China follows a compartmentalized approach in dealing with its domestic Muslim population and its foreign policy towards Islamist regimes: while it adopts a repressive domestic policy towards the Uygur Muslim communities at home, its foreign policy towards Muslim countries



led by Islamist regimes (e.g. Pakistan and Iran) is driven by interest. In general, China's approach to PIMs is pragmatic, which makes rapprochement with countries led by PIMs primarily dependent upon mutual interests.

### **Regional Situation**

The regional situation is not expected to witness significant changes in the short run due to the lack of both regional and international factors. In the long run, the accumulation of contradictory policies pursued by autocratic establishments might lead to social, political change, and shifts in regional alliances. Internationally, as a speaker contended, there is constant tension within strong democracies to move towards a non-fixed center. With the limited time remaining for Trump's presidency, there will be a backlash that could push in the opposite direction, and this could also be the case in the EU. However, in the meantime, the rise of right wing populism in Europe is discouraging constructive dialogue with PIMs in the MENA region. Moreover, the absence of an atmosphere of freedom along with the pressures of migration do not allow constructive reassessments and redirecting as PIMs tend more towards victimization and defensiveness. Nevertheless, PIMs are in need of such reassessments in order to aptly respond to changing orders.

### **Political Islam Movements in Changing Regional Order**

PIMs are facing a host of internal and external pressures pushing them in opposite directions. Rising voices from within in the MENA region are urging their movements to reform in an atmosphere of pressure on multiple levels. A conflicting trend driven by

internal pressures is also pushing PIMs to more conservative stances making PIMs less likely to implement any potential reforms, at least in the short-run. Both approaches are, in part, driven by the international context, that saw the rise of right-wing populist movements to power, especially in countries in the Western hemisphere. The rise of some of these movements in the West, which is partly attributed to the conflict in the MENA region and the ensuing refugee influx, have contributed to the further securitization of perceptions of PIMs in the WANA region and the wider geographic arena. The international context is also being shaped by the responses and pressures of state actors in the MENA region that are antagonistic to PIMs and their ideology.

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Regional polarization has pushed some PIMs from different sides of the spectrum to insulation, at least on the level of some factions. Some PIMs in the MENA region developed protective tactics that allowed them to maneuver through, considering the experiences they gained from monitoring the behaviour of other movements that were involved in chapters of domestic and regional turmoil. In certain cases, according to an Egyptian scholar, some state actors deliberately attempted to push PIMs to the right-side of the political-ideological spectrum in order to provide justification



for cracking down on them and uprooting them. Operating in a politically highly polarized region and both, shaping it and being shaped by it in a mutually constitutive manner, PIMs are more inclined to regress to protect and insulate themselves from conflicts that they could potentially be dragged into. As for the movements that are already involved in conflicts, they are keen on avoiding being bogged in more conflicts, according to one senior Tunisian Islamist participant.

### **The Effects of Political Inclusion and Exclusion on PIMs Strategy and Ideology**

Addressing the main question of whether political groups have a tendency towards moderation or radicalization in cases of political inclusion and exclusion, participants attended to various understandings of the descriptive terms (radicalization/moderation) through an examination of the practice and strategies of several PIM, mainly in Syria, Morocco and Egypt, and concluded with an emphasis on the limited usefulness of the descriptive terms (radicalization/moderation) if not employed in more complex and nuanced categorizations. Generally, moderation is employed in three different meanings: 1) Supporting or opposing liberal democratic reforms; 2) acceptance or rejection of the existing systems and 3) the usage of violent means to drive change.

Supporting or opposing liberal democratic reforms: In this understanding, moderates and radicals are typically viewed in terms of their involvement in political negotiations towards liberal democratic reform. One of the participants laid out three political settings or frames within which PIMs are influenced.

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First, a transitional, reformist, and integrative frame within which PIMs underwent fundamental changes and in certain cases moved further towards unbundling religious reform and political practice. Examples within this category include Tunisia's Ennahda Movement, the continuing divergence between Morocco's Justice and Development Party (JDP) and Movement for Unity and Reform (MUR), a process that commenced in the late 90s of the 20th century), and Algeria's Islamic Salvation Front (following a peace agreement).

Second, a transitional, quasi-authoritarian, and semi-integrative frame within which semi-integration and political openings lead to partial changes in PIMs. This is exemplified in the case of the Egyptian MB prior to the Arab Spring, undergoing gradual but fluid changes that lead to their participation in the Arab Spring protests. This also manifested during their rule in which the MB established a political party, but did not fundamentally move political policy- and decision-making from the movement to the party. One participant argued that the MB would not have participated in the Arab Spring if no internal changes had taken place. However, those changes are partial and reflect on the relationship of the Egyptian MB to others. According to another participant's account, "Jabhat al-inqath" called al-Gannoushi in May 2013 to mediate some demands to Morsi in order to diffuse the crisis but there was no response to al-Gannoushi because



the Egyptian MB considered him to be “ideologically too mild”.

Third, a conflictive frame, under an increasingly authoritarian environment, PIMs either radicalize or become insular. The Syrian MB is an example for such a transformation after the onset of the Syrian revolution in 2011. Aspects of this were also manifest in the fissures created in the aftermath of the crackdown on the Egyptian MB post-2013 coup.

Acceptance or rejection of the existing systems: Moderation and radicalization are typically used to reflect a general position of acceptance or rejection of the existing systems. According to such an understanding, most PIMs seem to have been undergoing the moderation process before the Arab Spring. Long before the Arab spring, many PIMs (especially the Egyptian MB and its sister movements) adopted a centralized nation-state as the starting point for their political visions and schemes, instead of a body politic comprised of the larger Muslim Ummah (collectivity), and have already participated in the electoral systems of their respective countries. However, with the advent of the Arab spring, the Egyptian MB came to grips with the question of reform vs. revolution, a question that continues to be a matter of contention within the group and one that costed the group large sectors of its youth who relinquished any path other than the revolutionary path towards democratization. Accordingly, political exclusion is correlated with radicalization. However, it is a radicalization that is not necessarily military. On the contrary, it is a form of radicalization towards democracy and democratic values. Thus,

the concept of moderation becomes complicated when we map onto it the binary of reform and revolution as means to achieve democratic change: the leaders of the PIMs who are considered relatively pragmatic and flexible (reformist) in their engagement with ruling regimes and rivaling political parties are simultaneously supportive of sustaining the rigid and hierarchical structure of their organizations. However, revolutionary elements (radicals) ask for fundamental changes in the existing system towards democratization and feud with organizational bodies over internal reforms. Two categories emerge out of the above: Conservative within/ reformist without and reformist within / radical without.

However these categories are more useful in analyses based on biographical trajectory for Islamists that can be traced on the individual level rather than the Macro-level of analyzing PIMs which can help better comprehend the transformations of Islamists and PIMs. Researchers should move away from thinking about the MB, and other PIMs as an exceptional or monolithic organization and need to start focusing on the individual rather than the social movement itself in if they really need to learn anything new.

(De) Militarization: (De)militarization is also regarded as a dimension in which moderation is understood. In that regard, the positions of PIMs on the usage of violent means to drive change can be divided into four categories:

First, a large camp that oppose, in principle, the usage of radical means



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to political change, largely led by MB movements (or MB ideologically-oriented) that abandoned this path (the Egyptian MB in the 50s and 60s of the 20th century). MBs are largely opposed to the deployment of violent means against local authorities, but encourage their usage against invading forces (Israeli occupation in Palestine and American forces in Iraq). However, there is not consensus between MB movements, in reference to Syria and Yemen. Second, a camp of PIMs that resorted tactically to the deployment of violent means against local authorities on a defensive-basis to protect themselves from eradication. This includes Algeria's Islamic Salvation Front as an example. Third, a large camp that subscribes to the Salafi Jihadi ideology that encourages the deployment of violent means to bring about social and political change. This not only comes as a result of a belief in the effectiveness of this mean, but also its legitimacy. Fourth, a camp of primarily Shia PIMs (and a few Sunni PIMs) that rely on a dual structure composed of a political party and a paramilitary force (quiet similar to the Islamic Republic of Iran's dual structure). This includes Hezbollah in Lebanon, Ansar Allah (known as the Houthi movement) in Yemen, an array of mainly Shia paramilitary forces in Iraq (now under the umbrella of the Popular Mobilization Units). Sunni PIMs that have such a structure include Hamas and the Islamic Jihad in Palestine. Beyond emulation of foreign models, these movements resort

to establishing such a structure because they feel insecure, and therefore a 'rescue network' represented in an armed wing is needed for them to preserve their presence (and this turns into a norm). Importantly, (de-)militarization in PIMs is not always a harmonious process, where factional, and individuals (sub-factional) have sway over the direction of a PIM, that can push it either way, or cause fragmentation.

### **Cases of some PIMs in Syria, Egypt and Morocco**

#### **1) PIMs in Syria**

Taking the case of Syria, PIMs were influenced by a myriad factors that shaped their identities, ideology, and strategies. The leading albeit insignificant PIM, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, was gradually engulfed by an array of Salafi Jihadist movements that did not exist in Syria prior to the revolution. A considerable number of the Salafi Jihadist fighters in Syria are not Syrian nationals, which adds more importance to distinguishing between Syria's Islamist movement(s) (national) and Salafi Jihadist groups that have emerged considering the transformation of the revolution into an armed conflict/civil war. Contrary to the Tunisian case in which neighbours and interested state actors sought its stability, in Syria, a segment of interested state actors aimed to instrumentalize the Syrian revolution against Iran (an ally of the Syrian government), while another segment sought to prop up the transforming revolution and specific non-state actors within it to incorporate the movement in its emerging regional axis. In Syria, the national Islamist movement



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In the case of the Syrian MB, the movement was widely repressed by the Syrian authorities in the 80s, which led to the minimization of their presence within the country, making them one of the least influential movements following the onset of the Syrian revolution. However, many MB-likeminded movements and individuals were active. The MB as a movement tried to reconnect with the Syrian homeland from exile via participating and establishing relief, civil, and political institutions and platforms. Ahrar al-Sham were influenced by how the MB was repressed, and by the American invasion of Iraq, which transformed them into a Salafi Jihadi-oriented movement.

## **2) Al-Nour Party in Egypt**

One of the major transformations that PIMs witnessed in post-2011 Egyptian context was the emergence of the Salafi-oriented al-Nour Party that reflected a trend of unprecedented politicization within the movement. The party made a significant and unprecedented ideological and strategic shift, in part to defend the movement's interests and existence via representation in the new political order in the country, following the 2011 uprising. This primarily

took shape through the formation of the al-Nour Party that was followed by other less influential and sizable Salafi-oriented parties. The shift generated a split in The dawa (religious preaching) movement into three groups: the first was supportive of backing the MB-affiliated Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) against secular political forces (while not necessarily practicing party politics). The second was represented in the Al-Nour Party, which was supportive of engagement in party politics and competing with FJP as a rival (although they existed in a coalition with the FJP). The al-Nour Party and FJP headed toward a collision course, according to the Salafi narrative, when the FJP did not fulfil their promises to the al-Nour Party by giving it ministerial positions. The third group was supportive of engaging in violent transnational networks to realize Islamic rule (Salafi Jihadism).

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The biggest challenge facing the al-Nour Party however, was how to reconcile the movement's engagement in party politics, via establishing political parties, with the preservation of its apolitical ideology. The Salafi ideology traditionally discourages party politics as a form of fragmentation in Muslims' ranks and discourages disobedience (political) vs. the Muslim ruler. The Al-Nour Party is yet to reconcile their history and ideology with their new political venture.

It is important to take into consideration that the al-Nour Party was not the only



manifestation of the growing dynamism and the reshuffling process that the PIMs went through in Egypt following the uprising in 2011. Similarly, the official religious authority in Egypt (as well as other institutions in the MENA region) contributes to the shaping of the political sphere, making PIMs, including the Salafi movement and its political offshoots, political interlocutors. The relationship between religious institutions and PIMs needs to be inquired into further with a special focus on narratives and legitimization processes.

### 3) The Dynamics of PIMs in Morocco

Three movements and parties, JDP, MUR, and the Justice and Spirituality movement, varyingly played influential roles in shaping the country's political scene from within the political and social arena, following the 2011 wave of protests. The key political actor among PIMs, was the JDP, taking the lead in the incumbent government and house of representatives. The JDP's phases in power could be divided into two: firstly, from 2012 to 2016. Secondly, in the period running from 2017 till now.

In the first phase, the JDP tried to increase the power/authority of the government, challenging the power of the palace, and pushing for specific reforms. In this period the JDP's moves were driven by Abdelilah Benkirane, the former Prime Minister. During this phase, public confidence in the party and the JDP-led government ebbed and flowed. An important factor in framing the JDP domestically and regionally, was the rising anti-political Islam sentiment across the North African sub-region, primarily in Tunisia and Egypt, especially with the success of

the military coup in Egypt against the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) government in 2013. The JDP was able to survive in power through a strategy combining pragmatism and effective messaging, where the outcome was a better working relationship with the palace.

The horizontal expansion of the JDP was a leading source of concern for the palace. In 2015, in terms of number of seats, the JDP came 3rd in local elections and 1st in the regional elections. In 2016, the party scored a higher number of seats in the parliamentary elections. As a consequence, first, the palace sought to hector the party into a weak coalition. Second, the palace stymied Abdelilah Benkirane second term and replaced him with a more docile figure represented in Saadeddine Othmani. How the palace de facto meddled in the party, created divisions within the party that produced two camps. The first camp was pushing for the appeasement of the palace to scale down its concerns about the party's intentions. The second camp was pushing for leveraging of the bargaining power that the party had gained and accumulated in the post-2011 protests period. The PDJ acquiesced to the palace's manipulation and remained in a weak government where its popularity relatively decreased, as was its internal cohesion. In response to the palace's pressures, the JDP started to retrench and think more strategically about its relations with the palace, and simultaneously, invest more in its social base.





## Possible trajectories for PIMs

The changes in the regional and international arena are increasingly challenging to the PIMs. Participants spoke about the threatening environment to the PIMs especially with efforts to label the Egyptian MB as a terrorist group and proposed strategies on how to move forward and secure the survival of the MB and similarly-threatened movements. The situation that the MB finds itself in is not unprecedented and the internal challenges are a manifestation of deeper historical currents and debates within the movement. However, the MB is lacking a coherent narrative and strategy in how to react to the challenges.

***On the micro-scale, one important aspect hindering the evolvement of intellectual and political innovation within the MB, is the organization's hierarchical rigidity that represses developing individual/human capacities***

With regard to the MB's Modus operandi in Egypt in the post-military coup period, some participants see the challenge ahead of the MB's leaderships as providing a coherent narrative on the FJD-MB's ouster from power, which it can capitalize on to re-engage politically in Egypt. In order for it to establish itself and stabilize the counter-revolution, the Sisi regime is employing the technique of tearing apart the social fabric in order to use one against the other. The most important strategy for MB is to start fixing its relationship with other components of Egyptian society, to establish alliances with Egyptian and international components and and

counter the narrative that the war is only between the army and the Islamists.

The MB movement appears to be unable to frame itself in the post-military coup period in Egypt, whether it is a reform-oriented movement or a revolution-oriented movement, which is affecting the process of self-reflection that should be underway. The main challenging question for the MB is whether the organization is revolutionary or evolutionary. This is a question of identity as much as it is a question of ideology and strategy to face the military-regime. There seems to be a growing, even if unvoiced, dissatisfaction amongst the base with the status quo of the organization and with the "wait-and-see" strategy that the old leadership seem to adopt. A clearer characterization of the organization's political (and ideological) orientations will very likely shape its strategies.

On the micro-scale, one important aspect hindering the evolvement of intellectual and political innovation within the MB, is the organization's hierarchical rigidity that represses developing individual/human capacities. The current weakening and fragmentation of the organization does not necessarily weaken the hierarchy and the prospects of organizational reform as a byproduct. Therefore, there is a tendency amongst critics to focus on micro-level problems in the movement, rather than the MB as a political and social movement as a whole through a more macro-perspective. Many speakers reiterated that the MB needs a fundamental and serious re-evaluation of two dimensions: their state-centric vision and their agenda of societal transformation. Speakers have focused



on the importance of the development of a clear political economic project that addresses the growing gaps between the rich and the poor and the dire economic situation which the poor find themselves in. The MB used to mediate between the elite and the rural areas, however they have recently started losing ground in rural areas.

Another participant emphasized the importance of reaching out to the West for the MB to counter the efforts to categorize it as a terrorist group. Beyond states, there is a fertile ground for partnership with the leftist groups within western civil society. PIMs need to evaluate their response to a growing Iran-Turkish alliance. Many have a fundamental visceral negative reaction to working with Iran but as political groups they need to move beyond visceral responses to consider how that relationship might be best leveraged in favor of the wider movement.

***This report was written by Tamer  
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### ABOUT ALSHARQ FORUM

The Sharq Forum is an independent international network whose mission is to undertake impartial research and develop long-term strategies to ensure the political development, social justice and economic prosperity of the people of Al-Sharq. The Forum does this through promoting the ideals of democratic participation, an informed citizenry, multi-stakeholder dialogue, social justice, and public-spirited research.

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