
Political Islam and protest movements

PID_00264516

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Recommended minimum time required: 2 hours



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The assignment and creation of this UOC Learning Resource have been coordinated by the lecturer: Maria Julià Barceló (2020)

First edition: February 2020
Authorship: Eduard Soler i Lecha
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Av. Tibidabo, 39-43, 08035 Barcelona
Publishing: FUOC



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Introduction

In the previous module, we have analysed the nature of political regimes in the Middle East and North African countries, pointing at the existence of several factors that have made authoritarianism particularly resilient in this part of the world. In this second module, we will analyse who has been the political opposition to these regimes, what kind of protests have erupted and with what effects.

As we have seen, in the fifties and sixties, state-building in this region was made at the expense of democracy and many regimes introduced a single-party system or went as far as forbidding any political party (this is the case of Libya). Thus, political opposition, which was then represented by left-wing parties as well as by Islamist movements, was severely repressed by both conservative monarchies, western-friendly republics such as Tunisia but also by presumably revolutionary regimes such as the ones of Egypt, Algeria, Syria, Libya and Iraq.

Yet, since the defeat of the Nasser-led alliance in the Arab-Israel war of 1967 and particularly with the sharp decline of pan-Arabism following the 1979 Camp David agreements between Egypt and Israel and the subsequent expulsion of Egypt from the Arab League, Islamist groups became the forerunners of political opposition in almost all Arab countries. It can be argued that Islamist groups represented the only sound political alternative to the elites that were in power. Arab regimes but also external actors, such as Israel and the US, combined strategies of repression and tolerance towards these movements, as they were at the same time a real challenge for their monopoly of power but also a useful tool to erode the remaining social bases of leftist, nationalist and revolutionary movements.

In Iran, a non-Arab Middle-Eastern country, Islamists gained power as a result of the Iranian revolution of 1979 and established an Islamic republic. Nevertheless, the attractiveness of the Iranian model for most Islamist groups in this region was nuanced due to the sunni–shia divide. More than a decade later, the Algerian elections of 1991 could have brought the Islamic Salvation Front to power. However, the intervention of the Algerian military (supported by both local actors and by France and the US) aborted this possibility. Later on, in 2006, Hamas (an Islamist Palestinian movement) won the legislative election in a process that was qualified as free and fair by international observers. Yet, an international boycott followed suit. In contrast, in Turkey, a party with an Islamic background, the Justice and Development Party (AKP), led by Recep Tayyip Erdogan, won the elections in 2002 and has, since then,

General readings

- Burgat, François** (2016). *Comprendre l'islam politique: Une trajectoire de recherche sur l'altérité islamiste, 1973-2016*. Paris: La Découverte.
- Esposito, John L.; John O. Voll** (1996). *Islam and Democracy*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Gerges, Fawaz** (2016). *The Struggle for the Arab World: The Nationalist-Islamist Long War*. Princeton University Press.
- Halliday, Fred** (2003). *Islam and the Myth of Confrontation: Religion and Politics in the Middle East*. London: I.B. Tauris.
- Lust-Okar, Ellen** (2005). *Structuring Conflict in the Arab World: Incumbents, Opponents, and Institutions*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Rodinson, Maxime** (1972). *Marxisme et monde musulman*. Paris: Seuil.
- Zubaida, Sami** (2009). *Islam, the People and the State: Political Ideas and Movements in the Middle East*. London: I.B. Tauris.

been portrayed as a model that makes Islam and Democracy compatible and has been internationally praised for being able to undergo a profound ideological evolution.

The academic and political focus on the phenomenon of political Islam, particularly its violent and radical expression, has for a long time diverted the attention from the analysis of other forms of political opposition. Protest movements, including worker strikes and citizens' platforms, which to a large extent were the precedent of major protests leading to the fall of several autocrats in the year 2011, have been a raising phenomenon in many Arab countries. This module provides an overview of both actors: political Islam and protest movements. The concluding section discusses what role they played and how they can benefit from the political changes that have occurred in the region since 2011.

Objectives

- 1.** Offer an overview of the ideological bases, the contemporary evolution and the diversity of movements included in the category of political Islam.
- 2.** Familiarise students with the strategies of protest movements (including worker movements, citizens' platforms, human rights activists etc.) and their impact on the Middle East today.

1. Political Islam: a common origin, distinct political strategies

There is no commonly agreed definition of what political Islam is. The attempt to come with a definition for this concept is even more difficult due to the existence of other terms that are often used as synonyms: radical Islam, fundamentalists, militant Islam or, simply put, Islamist forces. The term political Islam is used to refer to a very diverse type of movements, ranging from terrorist groups to moderate forces that accept to participate into parliamentary politics and reject all kinds of violence. The common element of all these groups is that they affirm that Islam is their ideological base, that is, their frame of reference. They want to establish an Islamic government in their respective home countries (based on Islamic law or *sharia*) and have the ultimate goal of unifying the Islamic world (*Umma*).

The origins of all these movements are to be found in the 19th century, as a reaction to the decline of the Muslim world compared to the strength and growing influence of Western and colonial powers. The dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire at the end of the First World War and the abolition of the Caliphate in 1924 by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk gave new arguments to these groups. The Islamist response advocated the restoration of the Caliphate, arguing that the ruling elites, with the support of external powers, had corrupted Islam. Thus, this movement can be defined as a *revivalist* movement (some may say a *regressionist* one) as they were inspired by the past and wanted to move back to an idealised past.

As Bruno Étienne (1987) argued, these movements propose the return to the ideal city state of the first four Caliphs as a cure for all the evils of modernity/modernisation. Some of the most influential thinkers in the inception of this movement were Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani (in Iran), Muhammad Abduh (in Egypt) and Rashid Rida (in Lebanon/Syria). The political views of these movements contrasted with liberal groups, which advocated the introduction of Western-inspired political, economic and administrative reforms, and were also opposed to the incipient leftist revolutionary parties that followed a revolutionary line (*thawra*).

General recommended readings

Ashour, Omar (2009). *The De-radicalization of Jihadists: Transforming Armed Islamist Movements*. New York: Routledge Publishers.

Ayoob, Mohamed (2007). *The Many Faces of Political Islam: Religion and Politics in the Muslim World*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

Ayubi, Nazih (1993). *Political Islam: Religion and Politics in the Arab World*, New York: Routledge.

Burgat, François (2003). *Face to face to political Islam*. London: IB Tauris.

Burgat, François (2016). *Comprendre l'islam politique: Une trajectoire de recherche sur l'altérité islamiste, 1973-2016*. Paris: Editions La Découverte.

Esposito, John L. (ed.) (1997). *Political Islam: Revolution, Radicalism, or Reform?* Boulder, CO.: Lynne Rienner.

Etienne, Bruno (1987). *L'islamisme radical*. Paris: Hachette.

Gómez García, Luz (2018). *Entre la sharía y la yihad: Una historia intelectual del islamismo*. Madrid: Los Libros de la Catarata.

Hamid, Shadi (2017). *Islamic Exceptionalism*. USA: Macmillan.

Ismail, Salwa (2006). *Rethinking Islamist Politics. Culture, State, the State and Islamism*. London: IB Tauris.

Kepel, Gilles (2000). *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Shehata, Samer (2012). *Islamist Politics in the Middle East: Movements and Change*. New York: Routledge.

In the 20th Century, the creation of two political forces, the Muslim Brotherhood (the *Ikhwan*) by Hassan Al-Banna in Egypt in 1928 and the *Jammat-e-Islami* in British India by Abu Ala Mawdudi in 1941, became the most visible political expression of this intellectual movement. The Muslim Brotherhood was particularly influential by setting a model for political activism and opening branches of this political movement around the Muslim world. The *Ikhwan* and the *Jammat-e-Islami* were similar in their rejection of European colonialism and the need to create an Islamic state. In both movements we can also observe a radicalization process, mainly as a result of the repression of these movements by the regimes. Sayyid Qutb, the successor of Hassan Al-Banna, led the radicalization of the Muslim Brotherhood movement and was executed in 1966. He became an icon and his works, for instance on the jihad, were particularly influential among groups that resorted to armed struggle.

A combination of factors has contributed to the strength of Islamist movements over time: the weakness of other opposition movements, which were either repressed or co-opted by the regimes in place; the decline of Arab nationalism following the 1967 Arab-Israeli War; the capacity of the Islamist movements to provide social assistance, healthcare and education at times when the states neglected such responsibilities (particularly since the implementation of IMF adjustment plans and privatization programmes); the abundance of financial resources from oil-rich countries, which allowed private (and in some occasions public) actors to support religious groups and charitable activities; and conflicts such as the Arab-Israeli wars, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the US intervention in Iraq, which provided the Islamist movements with arguments presenting the West (in cooperation with the Arab regimes) as enemies of Islam.

In today's Middle East, there is a wide range of political actors and all kinds of movements that call themselves "Islamists" or are called so by others. It is commonplace to differentiate between moderates and radicals.

As stated by Tamara Cofman Wittes,

"conventional policy discussions label Islamists either 'moderate' or 'radical', generally categorizing them according to two rather loose and unhelpful criteria. The first is violence: Radicals use it and moderates do not. This begs the question of how to classify groups that do not themselves engage in violence but who condone, justify, or even actively support the violence of others. A second, only somewhat more restrictive criterion is whether the groups or individuals in question accept the rules of the democratic electoral game. Popular sovereignty is no small concession for traditional Islamists, many of whom reject democratically elected governments as usurpers of God's sovereignty. Yet commitment to the procedural rules of democratic elections is not the same as commitment to democratic politics or governance." (2008, p. 7)

To confront these ambiguities, Coffman Wittes proposed a three-part typology of Islamist movements:

- The **Takfiri**, which are relatively small but important groups of radical, ideologically driven movements that label other Muslims heretics, apostates, and therefore justifiable targets of violence. Such groups include al-Qaeda, of course, along with its affiliates and allies in Algeria, Iraq and elsewhere. These groups take no interest in formal politics save for the strict pan-Islamic state that they envision setting up once they have toppled their region's existing governments. They glorify violence as a religious duty and reject democracy as a violation of God's sovereignty. This category corresponds to what some other authors qualify as jihadism or salafi-jihadism.
- **Nationalist militant Islamists**: such movements combine Islamist ideology with local political demands and include Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Palestine or the Shia militias of Iraq. Unlike the *takfiris*, they seek and benefit from the vocal support of a given local community. Notably, they all exist in weak or failing states (or nonstates, in the case of Hamas). Only regimes with weak legitimacy and a seriously incomplete monopoly on force are compelled to allow such groups to participate in politics with weapons in hand.
- **Non-violent political parties**: these groups eschew violence (at least locally) and aspire to a political role in their respective countries, without voicing any revolutionary goals. Such groups may operate as legal parties, such as the Islamic Action Front in Jordan and the Party of Justice and Development in Morocco, or they may be excluded from formal political recognition but still engage in the political process, like Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood (MB) or Kuwait's Islamist societies. They all want to transform society and government into something more Islamic, but aim to do so from below –that is, by persuading citizens to adopt Islamist ideas, demand Islamist policies from government and behave as more closely ob-

servant Muslims. This category corresponds to what other authors range as moderate Islamists.

For Marc Lynch, different Islamist groups are not only different but are even antithetical. He argues that the Muslim Brotherhood “poses a unique challenge to efforts to combat Al Qaeda and like-minded groups. It is one of the key sources of Islamist thought and political activism, with affiliated organizations in almost every country in the world and a sophisticated political and social infrastructure. It plays a crucial role in promoting Islamic consciousness and organizing political activism in a wide range of countries, particularly in the Arabic-speaking world. It strongly supports violent resistance against Israel, but at the same time has consistently denounced Al Qaeda’s ideology and terrorist activities in Muslim countries and in the West. It offers a significantly different vision of an Islamic state from that favoured by Salafi-jihadist groups”.

One of the many effects of Arab uprisings of 2011 is the increased fragmentation of the Islamist landscape with the appearance of political salafism, that is, the structuring of salafist political parties. Depending on the legislation and practices in place in different countries, these parties have become legal or operate in the shadows.

Salafism is a revivalist approach to Islam, which advocates looking back at the golden ages of Islam, rejects religious innovation and supports the implementation of sharia law. Traditionally, this movement was not involved in politics as Muslims have – according to their reading of religion – the obligation to support Islamic government, and rebelling against a Muslim ruler is forbidden. This particular approach corresponds to what has been called “salafi quietist”. In the pre-2011 context, the proliferation of jihadi-takfiri groups that claimed to be salafists was already a major change. The novelty in the post-2011 context is the strength of a third group: activists, those that are involved in politics and create organisations to promote their causes.

As explained in Meddeb *et al.* (2017), in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings these evolving ideological and doctrinal tensions have translated into acrimonious debates over participation in the political game, particularly in Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco. This is a debate inside those organisations, but also in the society as a whole. Some regimes – Egypt being the most obvious case – have favoured the appearance of those groups in an attempt to erode the appeal of the Muslim Brotherhood. The competition between these two Islamist political expressions, which also compete in the provision of services, charities and media, is one of the main features of identity politics in the post-2011 context. The support provided by Al Nour party – the largest Salafi party – to the coup d’état in Egypt against the Muslim Brotherhood government is the most obvious expression of this rivalry.

Recommended readings

Coffman Wittes, Tamar (2008). “Three Kinds of Movements”. *Journal of Democracy* (Vol. 19, Issue 3, July 2008, pp. 7-12).

Lynch, Marc (2010). “Islam Divided between Salafi-jihad and the Ikhwan.” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* (Vol. 33, Issue 6, pp. 467-487).

Lynch, Marc (2016a). “In Uncharted Waters. Islamist Parties beyond Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood”. In: *Carnegie Papers*. [Accessed: December]. <<http://carnegieendowment.org/publications/?fa=66483>>

Meddeb, Hamza, et al. (2017). “Religion and Politics. Religious Diversity, Political Fragmentation and Geopolitical Tensions in the MENA Region”. In: *MENARA Working Papers* (Vol. 7). <http://www.menaraproject.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/menara_wp_7.pdf>

Roy, Olivier (2017). “Political Islam after the Arab Spring”. In: *Foreign Affairs*. <<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/review-essay/2017-10-16/political-islam-after-arab-spring>>

The participation of Islamist parties – including the Salafists – in electoral competition has triggered a substantive and controversial debate on whether these movements could genuinely embrace democracy or whether their participation in elections is a purely tactical move to capture power without any possibility of alternation.

Jillian Schwedler, in a review article published in *World Politics* entitled “Can Islamists Become Moderates?”, reviews the scholarly literature that analyses changes in behaviour, ideology and tactics at different levels (groups and individuals). She argues that

“moderation is implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) tied to liberal notions of individual rights and democratic notions of tolerance, pluralism, and cooperation (...) mere participation in elections or democratic processes –behaviour that might appear to indicate the embrace of liberal and democratic norms of governance– is alone insufficient as an indicator of moderation; participation is a form of political behaviour that a group might adopt for purely strategic purposes while continuing to harbour a more radical political agenda.”

In her paper, Schwedler also reviews several of the factors that have been identified as conducive to moderation: political openings that create incentives for behavioural moderation, the existence of a charismatic leader providing an ideological justification for a shift that will allow him to profit from new political opportunities or cooperation across ideological lines with non-Islamist forces.

Bassam Tibi, in his article “Why they can’t be democratic” is much more emphatic, qualifying movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt or Hamas in Palestine as totalitarian. He argues that

“Islamism is not compatible with democracy, for Islamism’s sine qua non is the notion of *din-wa-dawla* (the organic unity of state and religion). If Islamists honestly –rather than tactically– were to accept democracy wholeheartedly, they would cease by that very act to be Islamists, and it would be wrong to call them such. Of Islamism’s two tactical orientations –institutional and jihadist– the latter, with its violent vision of Islamic world revolution, is easier to write off as plainly antithetical and destructive to democracy. The institutional Islamists pose a subtler challenge. They will compete in elections for instrumental reasons, but they refuse to accept the full measure of democracy, including the political culture of democratic pluralism –something that must never be forgotten.”

Much more nuanced, Nathan Brown, Marina Ottoway and Amr Hamzawy, in a paper published by the *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, listed six topics on which mainstream Islamist groups (including, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt) are particularly ambiguous. These are: Islamic law, violence, pluralism, civil and political rights, women’s rights and religious minorities. According to these authors,

“the resolution of these issues will determine whether the rise of Islamist movements leads the countries of the Arab world, finally, toward democracy or, conversely, to a new form of authoritarianism with an Islamic character.”

Finally, Sebnem Gumuscu, in an article published in *Comparative Political Studies*, identifies economic liberalisation as a key factor explaining the differences between the Turkish and Egyptian Islamist groups (and their different degrees of moderation/democratisation). According to her, economic liberalisation has not only distributed power among components of Islamist coalitions but also generated an elective affinity between the most powerful group and a liberal perception of Islam through novel articulations of Islam and its relations with the economy, politics and society. The emergence of a “devout bourgeoisie” in central Anatolia, to use Gumuscu’s term, or the rise of some sort of “Islamic Calvinists” is a relatively recent phenomenon and has been pointed out to explain the peculiarities of the ideological evolution of political Islam in Turkey.

Recommended readings

Brown, Nathan; Hamzawy, Amr; Ottaway, Marina (2006). “Islamist Movements and the Democratic Process in the Arab World: Exploring the Gray Zones”. *Carnegie Working Papers* (Issue 67).

Gumuscu, Sebnem (2010). “Class, Status and Party: The Changing Face of Political Islam in Turkey and Egypt”. *Comparative Political Studies* (Vol. 43, Issue 7, pp. 835-861).

Schwedler, Jillian (2006). *Faith in moderation: Islamist parties in Jordan and Yemen*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Schwedler, Jillian (2011). “Can Islamists Become Moderates?: Rethinking the Inclusion-Moderation Hypothesis”. *World Politics* (Vol. 63, Issue 2, pp. 347-376).

Tibi, Bassam (2008). “Why they can’t be democratic”. *Journal of Democracy*. (Vol. 19, Issue 3, pp. 43-48).

Coming back to Bassam Tibi’s argument, can we still qualify movements that abandon the goal of establishing a sharia-based Islamic state, such as the Turkish Justice and Democracy Party (AKP) or even Ennahda in Tunisia, as Islamist? Are those parties, such as the Freedom and Justice Party in Egypt or Hamas in Palestine, with a strong territorial and national (and even nationalist) ideology and which have abandoned the rhetoric of creating a political entity embracing all Muslim people, still part of the Islamist family? This debate has led some authors, such as Oliver Roy, to announce the failure of political Islam as an ideology, as it has been forced to evolve into something else that is, to some extent, contradictory to its founding principles, with new terms having been coined. Concepts such as “post-Islamism” or “Muslim democracy” have been coined to better describe the result of this ideological evolution.

According to Vali Nasr, the distinction between these groups and traditional Islamist movements is that

“Unlike Islamists, with their visions of rule by *shari'a* (Islamic law) or even a restored caliphate, Muslim Democrats view political life with a pragmatic eye. They reject or at least discount the classic Islamist claim that Islam commands the pursuit of a *shari'a* state, and their main goal tends to be the more mundane one of crafting viable electoral platforms and stable governing coalitions to serve individual and collective interests – Islamic as well as secular– within a democratic arena whose bounds they respect, win or lose. Islamists view democracy not as something deeply legitimate, but at best as a tool or tactic that may be useful in gaining the power to build an Islamic state. Muslim Democrats, by contrast, do not seek to enshrine Islam in politics, though they do wish to harness its potential to help them win votes.”

The nature, tactics and position in the political arena of Islamist political movements in each of the countries of this region are very diverse. That is why, next to the academic contributions that try to draw conclusions that could be applied to the whole region, we should take into account a vast literature that focuses on specific countries. The cases of the Turkish AKP (as the party that has undergone a more profound ideological evolution) or the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt (as it is seen as a party in which different sensitivities coexist and whose evolution could have a critical impact in other Arab countries) and Hamas (the case that better illustrates the increasing nationalistic rhetoric of Islamist groups and a party that has also accepted to participate in parliamentary politics) are particularly interesting. The evolution of political Islam in Morocco has also caught the attention of the academic community due to the existence of two movements: the Justice and Development Party, which participates in politics and accepts the red lines of the regime, and the movement *Al Adl wal Ihsan* (Justice and Charity), which has not been legalised as a political party and combines an anti-regime political agenda through social action and charity. Finally, Tunisia's Ennahda party is worth studying due to its positive role in the democratic transition and its capacity to form part of national agreements alongside secular parties.

The party congress in 2016, often referred to as a re-founding moment for this movement, was particularly important because an overwhelmingly majority of the party delegates voted in favour of separating the party's religious and political activities.

Recommended readings (case studies)

On Turkey (particularly the AKP)

Hale, William; Özbudun, Ergun (2009). *Islamism, democracy, and liberalism in Turkey the case of the AKP*. New York: Routledge.

Park, Bill (2018). “Populism and Islamism in Turkey”. In: *Turkish Studies* (Vol. 19, Issue 2, pp.169-175). DOI: 10.1080/14683849.2017.1407651

Turam, Berna (2006). *Between Islam and the State: The Politics of Engagement*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Yavuz, Hakan (2009). *Secularism and Muslim Democracy in Turkey*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

On the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood

El-Ghobashy, Mona (2005). “The Metamorphosis of the Egyptian Muslim Brothers”. *International Journal of Middle East Studies* (Vol. 37, Issue 3 (August), pp. 373-95).

Recommended readings

Bayat, Asef (2007). *Making Islam democratic: Social movements and the post-Islamist turn*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Hale, William (2005). “Christian Democracy and the AKP: Parallels and Contrasts”. *Turkish Studies* (Vol. 6, Issue 2).

Nasr, Vali (2005). “The Rise of ‘Muslim Democracy’”. *Journal of Democracy* (Vol. 16, Issue 2, pp. 13-27).

Roy, Olivier (1998). *The Failure of Political Islam*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Roy, Olivier (1999). “Le post-islamisme”. *Revue du Monde Musulman et de la Méditerranée* (Vol. 5-86, Issue 1).

El-Houdaiby, Ibrahim (2013). "From Prison to Palace: the Muslim Brotherhood's Challenges and Responses in Post-Revolution Egypt". In: *Frider Working Papers* (Issue 117). [Accessed: February]. <<http://fride.org/publication/1103/>>

El-Sherif, Achraf (2014). "The Muslim Brotherhood and the Future of Political Islam in Egypt". In: *Carnegie Papers*. [Accessed: 21 October]. <<http://carnegieendowment.org/publications/?fa=56980>>

Leiken, S.; Brooke, S. (2007). "The Moderate Muslim Brotherhood". *Foreign Affairs* (Vol. 86, Issue 2).

Wickham, Carrie Rosefsky (2003). *Mobilizing Islam: The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt*. New York: Columbia University Press.

On Hamas

Brenner, Björn (2017). *Gaza under Hamas: From Islamic Democracy to Islamist Governance*. New York: I.B.Tauris.

Hovdenak, Are (2009). "Hamas in transition: The failure of sanctions". *Democratization* (Vol. 16, Issue 1, pp. 59-80).

Hroub, Khaled (2002). *Hamas. Political Thought and Practice*. Washington DC: Institute for Palestine Studies.

On Morocco

Maghraoui, Abdeslam (2015). "Morocco: The King's Islamists". In: *Wilson Center Articles*. [Accessed: 27 August]. <<https://www.wilsoncenter.org/node/34975>>

Wegner, Eva (2011). *Islamist Opposition in Authoritarian Regimes: The Party of Justice and Development in Morocco*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.

Zeghal, Malika (2005). *Les islamistes marocains, le défi à la Monarchie*. Paris: La Découverte.

On Tunisia

Baker, Lauren et al. (2015). "Tunisia's Volatile Transition to Democracy". *POMEPS Briefings* (Issue 27).

Cavatorta, F., Merone, F. (2015). "Post-Islamism, ideological evolution and 'la tunisianité' of the Tunisian Islamist party al-Nahda". In: *Journal of Political Ideologies* (Issue 20, pp. 27-42). <<https://doi.org/10.1080/13569317.2015.991508>>

Ghannouchi, Rached (2016). "From Political Islam to Muslim Democracy". In: *Foreign Affairs* (September-October Issue). <<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/tunisia/political-islam-muslim-democracy>>

Ounissi, Sayida (2016). Ennahda from within: Islamists or "Muslim Democrats". In: *Brookings*. <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/OunissiRPI-Response-FINAL_v2.pdf>

Sadiki, Larbi (2016). "Tunisia: Ennahda's Second Founding". In: *Aljazeera Centre for Studies*. <<http://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/2016/06/tunisia-ennahda-founding160629140840011.htm>>

Stepan, Alfred (2016). "Multiple but Complementary, Not Conflictual, Leaderships: The Tunisian Democratic Transition in Comparative Perspective". *Daedalus* (Vol. 145, Issue 3, pp. 95-108).

Wolf, Anne (2017). *Political Islam in Tunisia. The History of Ennahda*. Hurst&Company.

Due to their popular support, the ideological evolution of Islamist groups is seen as a factor that can favour or hinder democratisation processes in the Middle East. At the same time, the democratisation processes that have started in several Arab countries since 2011 may also influence the doctrinal evolution of Islamist forces. In this new context, Islamist parties have started to

win elections and are assuming political responsibilities. This will be a litmus test to show whether they have embraced democracy and whether Muslim democracy takes roots in the Arab world.

2. Protest movements

Before 2011, the Iranian revolution in 1979 was the only experience in the Middle East where popular mobilisation for political reform succeeded in bringing on regime change, putting aside the struggle for independence. Previous attempts such as the Islamist mobilisations in Syria in the early eighties or more spontaneous demonstrations and riots elsewhere in the Arab world were unable to challenge the regimes and were met with harsh repression and, occasionally, some limited concessions by the incumbent governments.

The failure of protest movements, in addition to the strength and visibility of Islamist opposition, may explain why the academic literature has paid little attention to this phenomenon. However, in this section, we will give an overview on the development of protest movements in the Middle East and North Africa since the late 1970s until the so-called Arab Spring. After a short background note on the bread riots of the last quarter of the 20th century, we will identify the factors that have increased social unrest in many Arab countries since 2005. We will then move to the analysis of the petitionist phenomenon, a peculiar form of protest that is common to many Gulf countries and particularly spread in Saudi Arabia. Finally, this section concludes by assessing the nature, identifying the actors and evaluating the impact of the Arab Spring. It also discusses whether protest movements that have occurred since 2011 are the continuation of the same wave of protests or are indicative of a new trend in contentious politics.

The uprisings commonly known as the 'bread riots' were spontaneous protests that took place in most Arab countries in the late 70s and early 80s (although in some cases such as the bread riots in Mauritania they continued in the nineties). These protests, which paralysed the streets of cities such as Casablanca, Alexandria, Khartoum or Tunis were the popular response to the increase of food prices, in most cases after the reduction or the removal of government subsidies following the demands of the International Monetary Fund. These demonstrations were severely repressed by the coercive apparatus of these countries, resulting in hundreds of victims.

According to Larbi Sadiki, these events exemplified the collapse of a tacit pact between the ruler and the ruled, which is

“best encapsulated by the Arab term *dimuqratiyyat al-khubz* (democracy of bread). (...) Essentially, its chief premise is that post-independence Arab rulers have been paid political deference by their peoples in return for the provision of publicly subsidized services: education, health care, and a state commitment to secure employment. Political deference has been traded for *khubz*, or ‘bread’, used here in a generic sense to refer to free education, health care, and other services. Thus, the waning capacity to provide those services opened the window for limited political openings since the late 80s, in order to increase the domestic and international legitimacy of the regimes.”

He warns, however, that

“there should be no mistake, however, concerning the real motives and motivations of the liberalizing regimes: political reforms following mass riots are often carried out with the intention of manipulating the public and defusing serious crises of legitimacy and challenges to the rulers’ hold on power.”

While some opposition groups (including Islamists) gained popular support by joining these protests, trade unions were not particularly active. As explained by Éric Gobe, in most Arab countries, trade unions behaved as corporatist organisations and were closely linked to the incumbent regimes. The exceptions are, on the one hand, the *Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail (UGTT)*, which has been historically very active in the political life of this country, being the main counter-weight of the single party of Habib Bourghiba to the point that in the seventies it contested many of the government’s policies. On the other hand, Moroccan trade unions stand out as a case in itself in the Arab context due to their diversity and politicisation.

Next to these bread riots, which mushroomed in many Arab countries, we should also mention the existence of specific protest movements with a nationalistic or ethnic base. This is the case of the Intifada in Palestine in 1987 (see the third module) or the Black Spring of 2001 in the Berber region of Kabilia in Algeria.

A new wave of protest movements started in 2005 mainly in Egypt but also in other countries such as Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria and Jordan. It can be argued that this second generation of protest movements were the precedents of the popular uprisings of 2011.

In the case of Egypt, we should note the confluence of three types of movements: political activism denouncing the regimes’ authoritarian character and urging for political reforms (the clearest representative is the Kefaya movement (meaning *enough* in Arabic), worker strikes asking for better labour conditions and specific actions by professional groups (mainly lawyers and judges). This wide range of actors, which had no formal coordination among themselves, took the Egyptian streets in a context characterised by privatisation policies, constitutional amendments and the frequent rumours on the succession of Hosni Mubarak by his son, Gamal Mubarak.

In their review of protest movements in the region, Marina Ottaway and Amr Hamzawy argue that

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“in Egypt, strikers have been careful to strictly focus their demands on economic grievances. Political protest movements that flourished briefly around the 2005 parliamentary elections and then again during the 2010 elections did not reach out to the groups involved in labour and economic protest. The Kefaya movement –which was behind the first wave of political protest in the run-up to the 2005 elections– was founded by intellectuals demanding political reform and had limited success mobilizing a critical mass of protesters, and found it especially difficult to reach workers. The two streams of protest converged briefly in the nationwide strikes that occurred on April 6, 2008. Ultimately, the national protest highlighted the differences in demands and motivation between the various groups, with many workers and university students holding active demonstrations while prominent opposition members sat on the sidelines.”

In the Maghreb, demonstrations also took the streets of cities and towns even in very authoritarian contexts such as the one of Tunisia. There were political protests such as the 2005 demonstrations in defence of freedom of expression when Tunis hosted the World Summit on the Information Society but, even more important, in 2008, major clashes occurred in the mining area of Gafsa between workers and security forces. In Morocco, the movements of unemployed graduates have been particularly active in the organisation of rallies, sittings and demonstrations. In Algeria, there have been small-intensity protests to denounce housing policies, public works, electricity cuts or labour conditions all across the country.

The situation in the Moroccan-administered area of the Western Sahara deserves a mention apart. Next to the struggle between the Polisario (pro-independence movement whose headquarters are in the Algerian province of Tindouf) and Morocco, a new form of unrest has emerged in the areas controlled by Morocco, confronting indigenous Saharawi population with the Moroccan authorities and settlers. The episode of the Dignity Camp in Laâyoune in autumn 2010 has, to date, been the clearest example of how social protests can become an act of political and nationalistic contestation.

Demonstrating is, in some Arab countries, more difficult than in others. This explains why the petitioning phenomenon has been particularly popular in the Gulf Region and in countries where there is no margin for political organisation such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar or the Union of Arab Emirates. Petitioning has been a way for the less radical of the opposition sectors to convey their demands in a period in which some of these countries had suffered terrorist attacks by radical opposition groups.

In Saudi Arabia, for instance, different groups of intellectuals, ranging from the ulema to individuals with a Western education, submitted several open letters to rulers asking for better governance and more reforms in the early nineties. Among these, the Reform Petition in 1990, the Petition of moderate groups in 1991 and particularly the Memorandum of Advice in 1992, were signed predominantly by Islamist figures. In view of the lack of response from the authorities, in September 1993, more than 300 Saudis (including 50 women) signed another petition entitled “In defence of the nation” and, in December, they signed yet another one, “An Appeal to the Leadership and the People: Constitutional Reform First”. The response to this insistence was ambivalent. On the one hand, it showed certain openness by promulgating the

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Basic Law of Governance in 1992 and creating the Consultative Council (*Majlis al-Shura*) as a kind of parliament, but with neither legislative powers nor control. On the other, however, the regime did not hesitate in sanctioning the most non-conformist elements of the movement, through reprisals, including the imprisonment of some of the leaders of the petitioning movement.

Following 11th September, a revitalization of this phenomenon took place. In some cases, there were demands of an ideological, especially liberal, nature as in the petition entitled “A Vision for the Present and Future of the Homeland” in January 2003, or of a fiercely territorial nature, as in the petition of the People of Najran entitled “The Homeland for All, All for the Homeland”. While, in the beginning, the regime prosecuted those that dared to sign those letters, from 2003 onwards, King Abdullah opted for another strategy and launched a process of National Dialogue and introduced mild reforms (e.g. municipal elections).

Protest movements moved a step forward in 2011. The growing social and territorial disparities, high levels of corruption, worrying rates of youth unemployment, the increase of food prices, the waiving of civil and political freedoms, the abuses of power by security forces and the eroded legitimacy of the governments in place have been pointed out as factors that explain the growing discontent of the Arab streets and the virulence of the protest movements in 2011, popularly known as the Arab Spring.

The episode that started this phase of protests was a young Tunisian from Sidi Bouzid, a small city in the deprived centre-west of the country, setting himself on fire in front of the governors’ office. The desperate act of Mohamed Bouazizi, followed by massive demonstrations, public outrage and brutal repression throughout the country, started an unprecedented and largely unforeseen wave of protests that led to the fall of the then Tunisian ruler, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. The success of the Tunisian revolution inspired Egyptian activists, who also succeeded in overthrowing Hosni Mubarak within a few weeks, and other protest movements across the Arab world. During the first few months of 2011, all countries from Morocco to the Gulf were affected by this wave of social and political unrest, but with different degrees of intensity and effects. Even countries such as the Sultanate of Oman, with no tradition of demonstrations, experienced street protests.

The form and scope of the protests as well as the response of the regime varied from one country to another, depending among other factors on: 1) the nature, resources and cohesion of the regime, 2) socio-economic conditions, 3) the organisation of political opposition and 4) the existence of regional, ethnic, religious or linguistic tensions. These factors are relevant to understand not only when and how protests have erupted, but also how the political situation could evolve in the coming years in each of these countries.

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This wave of protests has not only challenged the incumbent regimes but the assumptions of political scientists and area studies specialists on the resilience of authoritarianism, on the passivity of the population or the role of political Islam. Several scholars, such as Dietrich Jung and Gregory Gause, have also published pieces trying to elucidate why “Middle East studies missed the Arab Spring”. Other authors, in contrast, have seen, in the Arab Spring, elements that confirmed their hypothesis on the failure of political Islam (Olivier Roy) and on the role of the coercive apparatus as a determining factor for the durability of authoritarian regimes in the region.

What has been the aftermath of this wave of protests? Steven Heydemann and Reinoud Leenders (2014) argue that

“just as the spread of protests itself was the product of social learning by Arab citizens –a wave effect facilitated by the rapid diffusion of ideas, discourses, and practices from one country to another and their adaptation to local contexts– so too were the counter-revolutionary strategies of regimes shaped by processes of learning and diffusion among regime elites, especially among those in which protests began later in the sequence of events that constitute the Arab uprising. In other words, two parallel processes were at work in the unfolding and potential unravelling of the Arab uprising, one at the level of Arab societies and the other among authoritarian regimes. Initially, these worked to the advantage of protesters. Subsequently, as regimes adapted to the repertoires of contention developed by the protesters and assessed the direction of regional and international trends, the advantage shifted in their direction”.

Although these processes have been a prominent element of the Arab Spring protests, learning and the diffusion of social movements in the region have been a reality beyond the Arab context. In his seminal book, Hamid Dabashi (2012) argues that:

“This permanent revolutionary mood has already connected the national to the transnational in unexpected and unfolding ways, leading to a reconfigured geopolitics of hope. That the Arab revolutions are changing our imaginative geography is already evident in the interaction between the southern and northern coasts of the Mediterranean in terms of modes of protest, with the spread of Tahrir Square-style youth uprisings evident from Greece to Spain, and indeed to the United States and the Occupy Wall Street movement - with even Aung San Suu Kyi comparing her campaign for democracy in Myanmar with the Arab Spring”.

The Green Movement in Iran that erupted following the country's presidential election in 2009 is one example preceding the Arab Spring, when protestors demanded the annulment of this fraudulent election. What started out as a peaceful protest in Tehran, spread around the country and turned into a mass movement. The movement revived in 2011 and once again led to clashes between the protestors and the state.

The social protest in Israel that occurred in July 2011 is another example of protest movements without the “Arab” notion of the Spring. The demonstrations were aimed at protesting against housing costs and demanding social justice generally, taking the form of mass camps, occupations and sit-ins. The

protests expanded and spread to people from different social classes and religions, being revived in 2012, yet pre-empted by the government and dispersed.

In Turkey, the Gezi protests that began in May 2013 as a sit-in protest against the urban renewal project designated for the Gezi Park in Istanbul rapidly turned into anti-government protests that lasted more than three months. In the end, the movement was confronted with various counter-mobilization strategies of the government and it dispersed without causing any lasting political change. However, it managed to bring together people from different social and political backgrounds as well as receiving international support.

Etel Solingen states that

“even assuming primarily regional sources of diffusion for [the Arab Spring] upheavals, their effects leapt into adjacent non-Arab states (including Israel’s 2011 protest movement).”

But she adds that higher firewalls in countries like Iran (in this case, also Turkey) blocked further diffusion between societies.

Widespread conflicts between the Sunni and Shiite communities around the Arab world lead many to perceive the Middle East as inherently sectarian. Although it is an influential factor on regional politics, new movements opting for anti-sectarian types of organization protesting against corruption, failure of state services and economic policies have taken place in a context of post-Arab Spring authoritarian restoration. According to Salloukh (2016, p. 79), “this kind of anti-sectarian politics does not fit the current narrative, making it all the more important”.

Two most prominent examples of such movements in Iraq and Lebanon erupted simultaneously. In Iraq, thousands of protestors filled the streets in 2015 against the squandering of public resources and bureaucratic corruption (being revived once again in 2016), as well as calling for an end to the sectarian quota system. At the same time, in Beirut, mass protests that started out against a waste management crisis turned into an anti-sectarian, anti-elite corruption movement.

While both cases were explicitly anti-sectarian, these protests failed to create their own institutional networks and spread nationwide, thus remained as contained movements. Salloukh (2016, p. 80) claims that these examples

“suggest that sectarianism is not taken for granted by all actors, and there are alternatives to the sectarianisation of everyday politics across the region. (...) And although they have yet to cause a real redistribution of political power that empowers counterfactual non-sectarian or cross-sectarian groups, these modes of resistance nevertheless demystify the sectarian narrative so dominant in the post-uprisings Arab public sphere, showing that sectarian modes of political mobilization are neither primordial nor insurmountable.”

In both Iraq and Lebanon, anti or cross-sectarian coalitions have become politically meaningful. In Iraq, the strategies towards and results of the Iraqi elections of the 2018 parliamentary elections are worth studying. The winner, the Alliance towards Reforms - Forward (Saairun), was a coalition led by the Shi'a Islamist Sadrist Integrity Party, the leftist Iraqi Communist Party. The parties that ran the campaign with a sectarian approach did much worse. In the case of Lebanon, the most relevant political translation of this new form of political engagement and social activism was the creation of the Beirut Medinati ('Beirut my city') alliance to run in 8 May 2016 municipality elections. They fell short of their goal of winning, with 40% of the votes.

In parallel, across the MENA region there has been a proliferation of protests in the countries' peripheries, which very often reflect on long-lasting territorial grievances. Examples of those are the protest movement in the northern Moroccan region of the Rif, as well as the protests in Basra, Iraq's largest city in the South. Despite this local dimension, it cannot be ruled out that those protest movements could scale up and become nation-wide, particularly if brutally repressed or if they articulate national concerns (corruption, poor quality of basic services, and so on).

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%20Movement_Published_English.pdfhttp://eprints.lse.ac.uk/88294/1/Faleh_Iraqi
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The massive protests in Sudan and Algeria in 2018 and 2019 and the fact that the protest movement was strong and persistent enough to force the resignation of Abdelaziz Bouteflika in Algiers and Omer al-Bashir in Khartoum has pushed some analysts such as Georges Fahmi to wonder whether this is a second wave of the Arab Spring. Positive reports would highlight the fact that those protests were spontaneous, leaderless and shared similar slogans. Alternatively, those movements can be seen as through the lenses of national specificities, pointing at the connections to previous revolutionary movements (the war of independence in Algeria or Sudanese pro-democracy struggles). Regardless of the concepts used to refer to these protests, what is clear is that the factors that drove popular unrest in 2011 have not dissipated but rather intensified.

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Summary

This module analyses more or less politically organised groups that have contested incumbent regimes in the Middle East and North Africa. Political Islamist groups (a category that encompasses very different political movements) have been, for several decades, the strongest alternative to the regimes in place. This module overviews the ideological bases and the contemporary evolution, and sheds some light on the diversity of movements and their sometimes contradictory strategies. It also analyses the dynamics of protest movements, pointing out the growing social unrest in several Arab countries since the year 2005 and advancing how the events of 2011 (the so-called Arab Spring) have channelled previous assumptions on the durability of authoritarianism in the Middle East.

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