The Ideological Moderation of Islamist Movements

Is Ideological Moderation a Result of Political Inclusion? A Study of Islamist Movements in Jordan and Egypt

The behaviour and ideology of any particular Islamist movement is rarely static. A large number of Islamist movements have swept through the Middle East, ranging from 'moderate' or 'mainstream' groups, generally thought of as those that condemn violence and seek to progressively transform the political system from below; to a minority of 'radical' and extremist organizations, who are commonly considered to be those that legitimize violence and seek to bring about change through revolution (Denoeux 2002, pp. 71-72, 68). While sharp distinctions have often been made between 'moderates' and 'radicals', Islamist movements often evolve over time, engaging in processes of moderation or radicalization. Much of the literature surrounding the moderation of Islamist movements draws upon the inclusion-moderation hypothesis, based on Samuel Huntington's (1991) notion of the participation/moderation trade-off: that by including radical political parties in the legal system, they will have to agree:

"to abandon violence and any commitment to revolution, to accept existing basic social, economic, and political institutions … and to work through elections and parliamentary procedures in order to achieve power and put through their policies" (p.170).

It is argued that through participation in the political process, Islamists are forced to compromise their previous principles and goals, and play by the rules of the game in order to maintain their position (Mufti as cited in Gurses 2012, p.2; Wickham 2004, p.206). Just as inclusion is regarded as a causal variable that leads to moderation, it is also argued that exclusion and repression results in radicalism (Schwedler 2006, p.16).

In this essay, I will investigate the factors that lead Islamist movements and parties to moderate their ideologies. I use the term 'moderate' to refer to Islamist movements that attempt to achieve their goals through bottom-up, non-violent methods, and are able to both accept democratic values and tolerate perspectives other than their own (Schwedler 2006, p.3; Dalacoura 2011, p.123). In the same sense, ideological moderation is defined as the gradual transformation of a movement's core values and beliefs from rigid and fixed, to flexible and tolerant (Schwedler 2006, p.3). I will challenge the inclusion-moderation and exclusion-radicalization hypotheses by investigating the cases of the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood and its political arm, the Islamic Action Front (IAF), the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, and Egypt's Wasat party. It will be seen that while political inclusion led to the moderation of the Jordanian Muslim Brothers and the IAF, Islamists in Egypt moderated their ideologies despite the exclusion and repression that these groups faced from the Egyptian government. While inclusion can, in certain cases, lead to the moderation of Islamist movements, there is not necessarily a causal relationship between inclusion and moderation nor exclusion and radicalization.

The Islamic Action Front, the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood's political party, was not established until 1992. However, political Islam has played a significant role in Jordan's social and political life since the mid-twentieth century. The Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood, a moderate, non-militant Islamist movement emphasizing gradual reform rather than revolution (Schwedler 2006, p.28), emerged as one of the most prominent social and political forces in the country upon its official founding in 1945 (Bar 1999, p.6). While other Islamist movements, such as the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, faced repression from the government, the Jordanian Muslim Brothers enjoyed

The Ideological Moderation of Islamist Movements
Written by Julia Tallmeister

particularly favourable relations with King Hussein of the Hashemite monarchy (Schwedler 2006, p.28). The King accepted the Brotherhood as "loyal opposition", as the group helped contain the threat of nationalist and leftist political parties such as the Communist Party and Ba'th parties, which challenged the legitimacy of the regime (Dalacoura 2011, p.125; Bar 1999, p.6; Sahliyeh 2005, p.113). In return for their loyalty, King Hussein continued to tolerate the Muslim Brothers of Jordan (Dalacoura 2011, p.125). Although political parties were illegal from 1957 to 1989, the King allowed them to continue to operate as a charitable organization and influence society from below through grassroots programs (Sahliyeh 2005, p.113; Dalacoura 2006, p.125). Members of the Brotherhood were permitted to run in the parliamentary elections of 1989 as individuals (Robinson 1997, p.374), and leaders of the movement were allowed to attain government positions in the ministries of Social Affairs, Education and Commerce, as well as at the level of cabinet (Sahliyeh 2005, p.113, Schwedler 2006, pp.28-29). In 1992, political parties were legalized and the Jordanian Muslim Brothers established their political wing, the Islamic Action Front, made up of members of the Brotherhood as well as other independent Islamists (Bar 1999, p.44). The IAF participated in parliamentary elections in 1993, 2003, and 2007 (Dalacoura 2011, p.127). Despite the semi-authoritarian and undemocratic nature of the Jordanian regime and the limitations it imposed on political opposition, Jordan's Muslim Brothers and the IAF have been able to operate within this limited political space (Brown 2006, p.4; Dalacoura 2011, p.127).

To what extent have the Jordanian Muslim Brothers and the IAF moderated as a result of their inclusion in Jordan's political system? In Katerina Dalacoura's (2011) investigation of the inclusion-moderation hypothesis, as it relates to Islamist movements, she notes that the Jordanian Muslim Brothers and the IAF have moderated their ideologies over the past several decades (p.128). The Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood and its political party has maintained a rigid and conservative social platform, advocating for mandatory head scarves and segregated classrooms while rejecting all forms of corruption including alcohol, drugs, nightclubs and gambling (Dalacoura 2011, p.128; Robinson 1997, p.377). However, as written by Dalacoura (2011), their position on political issues has gradually shifted "towards pragmatism and openness" (p.128). The political platform of the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood in 1989 emphasized democratic values such as the freedom of expression and worship (Robinson 1997, p.377). As explained by Glenn Robinson (1997), the IAF adopted a similar political platform upon its establishment in 1992, advocating for the implementation of *sharia* law, but placing less emphasis on religion and more on the importance of democratic principles and values (p.387). In 1994, Ishaq Farhan (as cited in Robinson 1997, p.379), leader of the IAF, stated that "[t]he Islamist groups here do not themselves believe in using force to bring about an Islamic society. We believe in democracy – and as a strategy, not a tactic. We accept freedom of thought and expression. Our strategic goal is to reclaim Islamic civilization, but that should be done gradually and democratically". While the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood held a moderate ideology from the outset, as the movement continued to participate in the political system it became increasingly explicit in its call for democracy; by 1992 the IAF was willing to not only tolerate democracy, but advocate for it.

The Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood and the IAF's willingness to cooperate with leftist, liberal, conservative, and nationalist parties acts as further evidence to show that political participation can lead to ideological moderation. For instance, members of the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood joined the National Charter Commission of 1991 alongside members of Jordan's secular opposition groups to produce the National Charter of 1991, a significant document that highlighted the rights and freedoms of Jordan's citizens (Dalacoura 2011, p.128; Schwedler 2006, p.109). As argued by Dalacoura (2011), since then, the Muslim Brotherhood and its political wing have "learnt how to cooperate with groups which they had hitherto shunned" (p.128).

A study by Janine Clark (2006) investigates how the Higher Committee for the Coordination of National Opposition Parties (HCCNOP), founded in Jordan in the mid-1990s, may also serve as evidence of the Islamist party's ideological moderation. Participation in the HCCNOP has enabled thirteen opposition parties, including the IAF, to coordinate their policies (Clark 2006, p.539). Clark (2006) remains sceptical of the inclusion-moderation hypothesis, concluding that although the IAF cooperates with the other parties within the HCCNOP in regards to several issues, "issues that are fully addressed by shari'a are not open for discussion with other parties" (p.540). Nevertheless, the IAF's willingness to cooperate with leftist, liberal, and conservative parties acts as further evidence to show that political participation can lead to ideological moderation. Jillian Schwedler (2006) writes that while the IAF did not share an ideology with the various groups on the opposition bloc, it was recognized that "strategic bargaining and

The Ideological Moderation of Islamist Movements

Written by Julia Tallmeister

cooperative agreements are among the most efficient and effective means of political contestation" (p.110). Although cooperation between groups may be limited to certain issues, the case of the HCCNOP illustrates that the political integration of the IAF has resulted in a certain level of openness and tolerance of diverse ideologies. Evidently, the participation of the Muslim Brotherhood and the IAF in Jordan's political system has led the movement and political party to embrace democratic values and cooperate with former ideological rivals, becoming more ideologically moderate (Schwedler 2006, p.112, 192).

In the same sense that inclusion is argued to lead to moderation, it is also claimed that exclusion and repression from the state leads to the radicalization of Islamist groups (Kubikova 2009, p.140). For instance, the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) was legalized as a political party in Algeria in 1989, after Islamist political opposition began to be tolerated by the state (Entelis 2001, p.67). The FIS participated in elections in 1990 and 1991 as a "pluralist and generally moderate party" (Entelis 2001, p.68). However, following a military coup in 1992, the party was outlawed and many of its leaders arrested by the new unelected government (Entelis 2001, p.71-72; Takeyh 2003). The FIS then underwent a process of radicalization, establishing a militant branch, the Army of Islamic Salvation, and endorsing violent warfare (START). As demonstrated in the case of the FIS, state repression can lead to radicalization. Nevertheless, the experiences of the Muslim Brotherhood and the Wasat party in Egypt prove that there is not necessarily a causal relationship between exclusion and radicalization. While Entelis (2001) writes that "…the future development of Islamic movements … depends on how groups such as FIS are treated or mistreated by those in power…" (p.72), political exclusion and state repression often lead to the moderation of Islamist movements.

The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood was founded in 1928 by Hasan al-Bana as a charitable religious organization with the goal of establishing an Islamic society, and has since become the largest and most influential Islamist movement in Egypt (Dalacoura 2011, pp.130-131; Leiken and Brooke 2007, p.107). There have been periods of cooperation with various Egyptian presidents since the establishment of the movement; however, unlike the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood, the Egyptian Muslim Brothers have primarily had an unsteady and problematic relationship with the state. The Brotherhood underwent a period of severe state repression and persecution between 1954 and 1971 initiated by the Nasser regime, in which several of its members were imprisoned and executed due to group's attempted assassination of Nasser in 1954 and accusations of plotting against the regime in 1965 (Zollner 2007, p.412; Dalacoura 2011, p.132). Undoubtedly, this period of imprisonment led to the radicalization of several members of the Muslim Brotherhood (Dalacoura 2011, p.132). For instance, it was at this time that Sayyid Qutb, a leading member of the Brotherhood, wrote *Signposts*, a major document providing guidelines of how to overthrow Nasser's regime (Dalacoura 2011, p.132; Kepel 1985, p.37). However, as written by Dalacoura (2011), after this period of repression the majority of the Brotherhood had learned that "a head-on confrontation with the regime was not only unwinnable, but suicidal" and the movement was willing to moderate (p.132). In 1969 Hasan Hudaybi, al-Bana's successor, wrote *Preachers Not Judges* as a response to Qutb's document, rejecting military jihad and demonstrating the more moderate and tolerant stance of the movement (Dalacoura 2011, p.132; Zollner 2012, p. 290).

While the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood faced periods of political exclusion during the Sadat and Mubarak regimes, it continued to follow a path of moderation and has, in due course, been able to justify democracy as compatible with Islamism (Leiken and Brooke 2007, p.110). While the movement's relations with the state had improved since the end of Nasser's regime, the Muslim Brotherhood remained an illegal opposition group (El-Ghobashy 2005, p.377). Although Sadat and Mubarak did, at times, allow for the group's participation in the Egyptian political system, this was often followed by further state repression (Dalacoura 2011, p.139). Members of the Brotherhood have been arrested on several occasions for being overly critical of the government (Abed-Kotob 1995, p.335). For instance, in 1990, members were arrested and tortured for opposing the Madrid peace conference, and were again arrested in 1991 for opposing the government's involvement in the following peace talks (Abed-Kotob 1995, pp.335-336). In 1995, security forces detained eighty-two members of the Brotherhood just before elections, and fifty-four served three to five year sentences in prison, accused of plotting to overthrow Mubarak's regime (Stacher 2002, p.421; El-Ghobashy 2005, p.384).

The exclusion-radicalization hypothesis would predict that repression such as this would result in violence and terrorism; however, the ideology of the Brotherhood has become increasingly moderate. While the aim of establishing

The Ideological Moderation of Islamist Movements

Written by Julia Tallmeister

an Islamic society has remained the goal of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood since 1928 (Abed-Kotob 1995, p.323), the organization has, in the words of Mona El-Ghobashy (2005), "morphed from a highly secretive, hierarchical, antidemocratic organization led by anointed elders, into a modern, multivocal political association steered by educated, savvy professionals not unlike activists of the same age in rival Egyptian political parties" (p.373). The ideological moderation of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood is demonstrated by its continual rejection of violence, a transformation in its views of women's rights, and a formal acceptance of democratic values, signalling a significant shift away from Hasan al-Bana's original ambivalence towards democracy (Dalacoura 2011, p.133, 136, 131; El-Ghobashy 2005, p.133).

The Wasat party emerged in 1996 as a splinter group that broke away from the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood after internal disagreements over whether or not the Brotherhood should establish itself as a political party (Leiken and Brooke 2007, p.113). This Islamist party is based on a reinterpretation of Muslim texts which emphasizes human rights and democratic values (Wickham 2004, p.207). Although the Wasat party was finally legalized as a moderate Islamic party in 2011 after the Egyptian Revolution, its application for legal party status was rejected multiple times during the Mubarak regime (Youseff 2011; Stacher 2002, p.416). Nevertheless, its members did not radicalize due to continuous political exclusion.

While more than half of its founding members came from the Muslim Brotherhood, the Wasat party reflects an even more moderate ideology, demonstrating that ideological moderation can occur despite political exclusion (Hatina 2010, p.173-174). As written by Carrie Wickham (2004), the party has made a subtle but noteworthy movement away from the more religiously conservative Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood as it

"affirms the principle of popular sovereignty as the basis of legitimate state power, endorses pluralism in all spheres of social and political life, and supports equal rights for all citizens, including women and non-Muslim minorities" (p.207).

Both the inclusion-moderation and exclusion-radicalization hypotheses are insufficient explanations of why the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and the more recently formed Wasat party hold moderate ideologies and embrace democracy, despite political exclusion and state repression. Gilles Kipel (as cited in Stacher 2002, p.416) explains the movement that Islamist groups have made towards moderation and pragmatism as a reaction to state repression. He writes:

"Islamist movements and parties at the turn of the 21st century are striving to reinvent themselves as democratic movements, to denounce the repression they feel they have been victim to. They now invoke the universal rights of man instead of critiquing them with their own substitute version, and they support the previously decried values of the impious West, like freedom of expression and women's liberties" (Kepel as cited in Stacher 2002, p.416).

It is likely that the constant fear of government repression and imprisonment has resulted in the moderation of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood (Stacher 2002, p.421). The Brotherhood has moderated due to its need for self-preservation and continued existence in repressive authoritarian regimes (El-Ghobashy 2005, p.391).

If following the logic that ideological moderation is a result of political inclusion, it would come as a surprise that the Wasat party was formed shortly after the imprisonment of several members of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood in 1995 (Wickham 2004, p.213). Wickham (2004) argues that in the case of the Wasat party, ideological moderation occurred as an outcome of strategic calculation, writing that:

"Egypt demonstrates increased repression can sometimes induce ideological moderation as 'rational' opposition actors moderate their agendas not only to seize new political opportunities but also to evade new political constraints" (p.213).

Contrary to the logic that inclusion leads to moderation and repression leads to radicalization, even under authoritarian regimes, these Islamist groups in Egypt moderated in order to avoid state repression, instead of radicalizing and violently confronting the regime (Wickham 2004, p.213).

The Ideological Moderation of Islamist Movements

Written by Julia Tallmeister

As demonstrated in this essay, there are specific cases in which the inclusion-moderation theory can be used for account for the ideological moderation of Islamist groups, such as the cases of the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood and the Islamic Action Front. However, the experiences of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and the Wasat party demonstrate that neither the inclusion-moderation nor the exclusion-radicalization hypotheses should be used as general theories to explain why Islamist groups, as a whole, moderate. The reasons for the ideological moderation of several unique Islamist movements and political parties must be investigated separately, as the conditions under which they moderate may differ drastically. In Jordan, the Muslim Brothers and the IAF became increasingly moderate as they participated in the political system and were thus provided with incentives to cooperate with several other political opposition groups. In Egypt, the ideological moderation of the Muslim Brotherhood and Wasat party occurred due to the need to avoid state repression (Wickham 2004, p.213). Evidently, there is not necessarily a causal relationship between inclusion and moderation, nor between exclusion and radicalization, as Islamist movements and parties can moderate their ideologies under both inclusive and exclusive regimes.

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The Ideological Moderation of Islamist Movements

Written by Julia Tallmeister

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