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Unresolved Questions and another Crossroads in Turkey

By Vera Eccarius-Kelly

Ideological Uncertainty

Ever since Turkey's 1980 military coup, the country's party system has failed to reflect the ideological spectrum within Turkish civil society. As a result, the past two decades have been filled with violent reactions by the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) and highly charged political challenges from Islamists. The unrest has widened existing cracks in the Kemalist paradigm—what many view as an artificial vision of secular and homogeneous Turkish nationhood. Yet despite the growing domestic dissent, representatives of the Kemalist state bureaucracy continue to espouse the same obsolete principles.

Among the leading causes of social conflict is a sense of frustration among the general population with the country's unresolved question of national identity. Additionally, there is widespread disillusionment among intellectual and economic elites that Turkey's chances for joining the European Union (EU) may be slipping away. Nationalists, who support a belligerent interpretation of ethnocentric Turkish nationalism, confront challengers who demand the advancement of socio-political and economic reform packages. In this volatile political environment of ideological confrontation and transformation, one particular issue remains unexamined today—namely the possibility of whether Turkey will embrace a broadly defined liberal-democratic framework.

In this article the author postulates three potential scenarios that may shape Turkey's future: (1) renewed repression, (2) accommodation and multiculturalism, and (3) socio-political paralysis. To contextualize the domestic and foreign policy consequences of each option, the article examines the military's involvement in policy making, the influence of the political class on reform efforts, and the impact of civil society actors. The outcome and future consequences of Turkey's transformative ideological process are highly relevant to policy makers in both Europe and the United States as Turkey asserts itself as an increasingly independent actor in the region.

A New Social Contract

Turkish civil society has arrived at a crossroads, yet the lack of attention paid by analysts in Europe and the United States demonstrates a failure to recognize and appreciate the critical transformation that is reshaping Turkey. [1] At a recently convened international conference in Montreal, a distinguished Turkish scholar recounted an enlightening experience he had at a British university. [2] When he asked his colleagues in the Middle East Studies field which Turkey-related articles the students were reading in their courses, they stated that "Turkey does not fit well within Middle East studies." His British colleagues then suggested that he check in with the Europeanists. The Turkish scholar then asked European historians and political scientists about their reading selections on Turkey, and they responded: "We don't address Turkey…shouldn't Turkey be integrated into Middle East Studies?" The confused Turkish scholar wondered if Turkey was actually being studied at all.

This anecdote serves to contextualize the reasons why Turkish issues have been overlooked by policy makers in Europe and the United States. Turkey asserts an increasingly independent policy path in the post Cold War era and no longer fits the once neat categorization of Western ally and NATO member, especially since the US war in Iraq. The country straddles a largely undefined political space and pursues its own interests in the Middle East. As Turkey's role in the region continues to grow, both Europe and the United States will be better off paying closer attention to the socio-political developments in Turkey.

The country's domestic and foreign policy choices indicate some potential for increased social unrest and radicalization in the near future. In July 2007, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) garnered nearly 47% of support in the Grand National Assembly. Since then, AKP has consolidated its influence and emerged as the most effective grassroots–based actor in Turkish society by presenting a counterweight to the military establishment. [4] Turkish Prime Minister Recep Erdogan depicts the AKP as a center-right, conservative Muslim party with both a pro-Western and pro-business outlook. However, many Europeans express doubt because they suspect that the Turkish secularist establishment may be correct in asserting that the AKP represents a hidden Islamist agenda. Europe's political class wants to see clearer signs of democratization in Turkey. Despite long-standing disputes over the portrayal of the AKP's true objectives, Turkey's parliamentary elections confirmed the dominant position of the AKP.

Another significant event was the outcome of the 2007 parliamentary election, in which the Kurdish minority's provided an unprecedented and surprisingly strong voice in the new parliament. The emergence of minority representation in parliament signifies noteworthy progress in terms of future opportunities for articulation of ethnic and religious interests in Turkey. For the first time in Turkish elections, independent Kurdish candidates were able to advocate for Kurdish regional interests in the national assembly. [5]

Among the most surprising of the elected Kurdish parliamentarians is Sebahat Tuncel, a young woman who had been imprisoned for separatist activities since the end of 2006 (i.e. she stands accused of affiliation and collaboration with the PKK). [6] Because Turkish law mandates that all parliamentarians enjoy legal immunity while serving as elected representatives, Tuncel was released from prison and installed as a member of the new Turkish parliament. She belongs to the original group of founders of the Democratic Society Party (DTP), which circumvented the rigid electoral regulations by having its candidates run as independents. As a Kurdish successor party to a number of banned forerunners including the People's Labor Party (HEP), the Democratic Party (DEP), and the Democratic People's Party (HADEP), the DTP is perceived by Turkish secularists, and especially the military, as supportive of the radical PKK.

The election presents another indicator that the established framework of the Kemalist state will continue to face political challenges. Over time, as popular support for Kemalism has diminished, it has become more and more acceptable to question the legitimacy and authenticity of the state apparatus. This in turn has increased the frequency of debates over the role of religion in public life, allowed for questions related to the relevance of Kemalism in the post Cold War environment,; and invited growing expressions of doubt about the influential role of the military. [7] In essence, Turkish society now enjoys its first realistic opportunity to overcome the long-term damage caused by the military's intervention during earlier decades. Turkish society is engaging in negotiations over a new social contract, but the outcome of this clearly painful process will depend on the conduct of a few influential players.

Three Alternative Paths: Repression, Multiculturalism, or Paralysis?

The most troubling option available to Turkish society is renewed military repression as a response to increasingly violent ideological clashes among political actors, Islamists, and the Kurdish minority. This alternative would establish a sense of order in Turkish society in the short term, but would simultaneously create socio-economic instability and enhance conditions for wide-spread terrorism in the long run. Although the military is clearly cognizant of this side effect, it perceives itself as the guarantor of secular, modern, and positivist Kemalist principles, and therefore, suspiciously observes policies that may weaken the country's ideological heritage. For example, the AKP, as a grass-roots Muslim party, espouses religiously grounded values, which are often construed by members of the military establishment as an affront to pure Kemalist principles. A major topic of debate in Turkey relates to the role of religion in public life, a good example is the familiar headscarves debate—as religious Turks aim to overturn the secularist ban on wearing headscarves in public schools and state buildings. [8]

But the issue that causes concern regarding the possibility of military intervention relates to the Kurdish question in the country. While the AKP-led governments enacted a series of significant reforms with the support of a broad-based coalition of conservative Muslims and urban and economic interests, the political elite did not entirely succeed in marginalizing the military's influence on domestic security concerns. When Kurdish civil society organizations challenge the dominance of the Kemalist ideology, they are confronted with hostility by the Turkish state. For example, dozens of elected mayors from the pro-Kurdish DTP who supported Denmark-based Kurdish Roj-TV faced persecution and threats for sending a signed letter to the Danish government expressing their desire to keep Roj-TV on the air. Turkish state authorities accused the DTP leadership of "knowingly and willingly supporting the PKK", and the mayors experienced a range of judicial harassments according to Amnesty International. [9]

For decades the military has invested enormous political and financial capital in the eradication of the PKK. This has made it almost untenable for the political class to pursue a path toward a reasonable compromise in the Kurdish southeastern provinces. In the attempt to destroy and marginalize the PKK the military unintentionally invigorated Kurdish nationalism, mostly as a consequence of repressive counterinsurgency policies. Over the past year skirmishes between Turkish military units and cadres of the PKK have intensified along the Turkish-Iraqi border region. To the distress of the Turkish military, the US and its Iraqi Kurdish allies appear to have ignored PKK units that are deeply ensconced along the border region. From those hideouts in northern Iraq the PKK continues to mount regular attacks on Turkish troops and soft targets inside Turkey.

Turkey faces intensive pressure from the EU to speed up its domestic democratization efforts and must also deal with US demands that they avoid complicating the conditions in northern Iraq. This demand has put the military in a difficult position because Turkey's military is confronting a direct challenge from PKK guerrilla units and the country's civilian political elite must respond to rising levels of domestic nationalism. Ultra nationalists increasingly express anger over the continued attacks by the PKK, engaging in aggressive demonstrations and street protests. [10] Conditions along the border region between northern Iraq and southeastern Turkey are explosive, untenable, and fluid, while the atmosphere in the country reflects growing domestic pressure to assert sovereign control over borders and the management of security issues. The potential for the reassertion of core Kemalist principles exists only if the military regains its status through collaboration with civilian organizations. If the political and business elite accept or encourage an ethnocentric nationalist ideology that could be described as Kemalism on steroids, the military may become more influential; perhaps even a key actor.

The second option for Turkish society is to embrace a social contract based on a larger liberal democratic framework linked to the idea of a multicultural agreement. In 1999, when the EU encouraged Turkey to prepare to apply for full membership status, the Turkish government and many civil society organizations embraced the ideals of multiculturalism and principles of human rights to advance the country's commitment to European integration. Kurdish political parties and their affiliated civil society organizations successfully appealed to EU institutions to push for improvements in human rights norms and advances in terms of minority protections. But many problems remain, such as the military's long standing ability to influence or shape public policy. The Turkish General Staff can still intervene in the political affairs of the country if it considers it necessary to protect the unity or secular ideals of the state. In addition, Kurdish cultural rights remain restricted, including full access to Kurdish language education and broadcasting. Article 301 of the penal code also presents an ongoing problem as it can be used to limit the freedom of expression related to the Kurdish minority and the state's denial of the Armenian genocide as the Ottoman Empire disintegrated.

Turkey's reformers need the support of the EU to continue to make progress toward a negotiated and revised social contract. As long as the military believes that European integration can ensure the protection of secular structures within Turkish society, and as long as the intellectual and business elites see tangible benefits linked to the process of economic and social integration, Turkey has a real chance of pursuing this path.

Embracing a liberal democratic framework also requires discarding the obsolete ideals of Kemalism, which will result in a rise of political violence in the short term. The question is whether the military will show restraint and avoid intervening to establish order, and if the Europeans can see past the immediate rise in violence to support the establishment of a liberal democratic Turkey.

Finally, the third alternative for Turkey can best be described as political paralysis. With a growing sense that Europe may never overcome its multilayered reluctance to open its doors to Turkey, there is confusion within the political class and the military establishment over how to advance the country's position. Europe's lack of enthusiasm relates to the potential flow of labor migrants from Turkey to Europe, followed by a noticeable increase in Europe's Muslim populations, and the fact that Turkey would become a powerful member of the EU because of its large population. In particular, Germany's Angela Merkel and France's Nicolas Sarkozy expressed concern over Turkey's ability to reform sufficiently to gain entry. They cautioned that Turkish society may not be committed or even 'culturally capable' to democratize sufficiently. [11] Echoing criticism articulated in the European Parliament, it is regularly suggested that Turkey made insufficient progress in the areas of freedom of expression, minority rights, corruption, and violence against women. [12]

The potential for violence both in the short and long-terms is high. Should civil society begin to feel that the AKP can not implement the socio-economic progress it was elected to achieve, extremists will become empowered. Political paralysis would encourage frustrated and disillusioned groups to blame opponents for the lack of advancement in Turkey. Ultra nationalists would therefore have a stake in trying to reassert influence, and radical Kurds would find reasons to embrace a new campaign of militancy. At the same time, Islamists would seek strong religious leadership to advance the ideals of a more committed Islamic society.

Conclusion

Moderate Islamists and members of AKP may disagree with many civil society organizations, including Kurdish groups on the role of Islam in society. Yet they tend to share a common interest by favoring Turkish membership in the EU. The governing AKP perceives the EU as a vehicle to economic prosperity for its constituency, while civil society organizations and Kurdish groups argue that EU membership will strengthen human rights in Turkey. An influential AKP can create the necessary political environment that allows traditionally marginalized groups such as the Kurds to collaborate. But PKK violence in the southeastern provinces has led to a hardening of positions both inside the military and the AKP. The rise of extreme nationalist sentiments across Turkey impeded efforts to advance a version of the multicultural, liberal democratic model. Impending developments in northern Iraq are of utmost significance for the future of Turkey's negotiation over a new social contract. Fears of a divided Iraq or an autonomous northern Iraq will strengthen PKK guerrilla units, reinforce irredentist activities inside Turkey, and fortify the role played by Turkish nationalists and the Turkish military. A full commitment to eradicating the PKK may bring Turkey closer to Syria and Iran rather than strengthen the country's relationship with Europe.

Both Europe and the United States can make a difference and support the preferential path toward further democratization in Turkey. By continuing to assist Turkey in accelerating its transition toward democracy, liberal democracies can inspire a commitment to proceed with reforms. It is important to encourage Turkey's military to accept a subordinate position to civilian leadership, allowing the government to pursue EU membership. Europe, in turn, needs to reward reforms with the possibility of future economic benefits.

In supporting such progress, students and policy makers alike may want to add Turkey to their reading lists—understanding that Turkey belongs as a critical subject in both Middle East Studies *and* European Studies.

Vera Eccarius-Kelly is Assistant Professor of Political Science at Siena College, NY, and specializes in comparative revolutionary movements in the Middle East and Latin America.

NOTES:

[1] The concept of Turkey's search for a new social contract was first articulated by Yavuz, M. Hakan in *Search for a New Social Contract in Turkey: Fethullah Gulen, the Virtue Party and the Kurds*, SAIS Review, Vol. 19, No. 1, Winter-Spring 1999, pp. 114-143.

[2] The author paraphrases an account shared by Dr. Metin Heper from Bilkent University at the IMMD Conference in Montreal, CA, on October 26, 2007.

[3] F. Stephen Larrabee and Ian O. Lesser, *Turkish Foreign Policy in an Age of Uncertainty*, Center for Middle East Public Policy, Rand Corporation, 2003.

[4] Total turnout of eligible voters was slightly over 84 percent in the 2007 parliamentary election; Justice and Development or AKP garnered 46.6 percent or 341 seats, the Republican People's Party or CHP earned 20.8 percent or 112 seats, the Nationalist Movement Party or MHP collected 14.3 percent or 71 seats. Independents gained 5.2 percent of the vote or 26 seats. Among the independent parliamentarians are ethno-national Kurds with separatist aspirations.

[5] For a party to be represented in Turkish parliament, it has to gain at least 10% of the national vote. Independent candidates are eligible to run, and can be elected to parliament, yet they need only win 10% of the provincial vote; this strategy allowed Kurdish representatives to enter parliament.

[6] This *International Herald Tribune* article discusses perceptions related to the DTP; http://www.iht.com/articles/ap/2007/08/03/europe/EU-POL-Turkey-Kurdish-Lawmakers.php

[7] These comments are based on the author's conversations with Turkish civil society activists and scholars in Istanbul in November 2007.

[8] For additional details on the headscarves debate and the European Court of Human Rights' ruling on related law suits, see http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4424776.stm

[9] Yigal Schleifer, "Denmark, Again? Now it's under fire for hosting Kurdish TV station," *The Christian Science Monitor*, 21 April 2006. Available at http://www.csmonitor.com/2006/0421/p01s01-woeu.html

[10] The comment is related to the author's observations and conversations with Turkish political activists and scholars in Istanbul in November 2007.

[11] For a discussion on European assessments of Turkey's democratization efforts and the Kurdish minority, see this author's article entitled *Political Movements and Leverage Points: Kurdish Activism in the European Diaspora*, Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs, Vo. 22, No. 1, 2002, pp. 91-118.

[12] For further information, see the *Turkey 2007 Progress Report*, a European Commission working document, which is available in its entirety at http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/key_documents/2007/nov/turkey_progress_reports_en.pdf

Alternative Lessons from the ‘Algerian Scenario’

By Francesco Cavatorta

While it might be too strong to suggest that the ‘Algerian scenario’ dominates the politics of the Middle East and North Africa, its importance over the last two decades in structuring the political confrontation between regimes, Islamists, secular opposition, and the international community should not be underestimated.

Under severe popular pressure from an unprecedented economic crisis, the Algerian regime opened up the political system in 1989 with the hope of regaining legitimacy. Contrary to the expectation of the ruling elites, the process of democratization fuelled the ascendancy of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), which challenged the very nature of the Algerian state.

During a tumultuous three years of political liberalization, free elections, and personal freedoms, the FIS emerged as the principal political movement in the country and was poised to take power after a landslide victory in the first round of the 1991 legislative elections. However, the second round never took place because the Army intervened in the political process. Following the military coup, authoritarian rule was re-instated, while the FIS was banned and its members imprisoned. Rather than simply fading away, a significant number of Islamist militants took up arms against the regime and a civil conflict ensued.

The Algerian war, largely fought away from the cameras and international public opinion, caused more than 150,000 casualties and was characterized by unspeakable brutality. The military junta accused the insurgents of “terrorism”, while the Islamist groups accused the security forces and their political supporters of “state terrorism” against the free will of the Algerian people who had expressed their preference for Islamism at the polls. The Algerian failure at democratization and its descent into civil war provided a number of lessons for political actors outside the country and later came to be known as the “Algerian scenario” – a scenario which was to be avoided at all costs.

Ruling regimes across the Middle East and North Africa came to recognize that they enjoyed very little internal legitimacy and that quickly opening up the political system – such as in the case of Algeria - would backfire. Thus, they opted instead for eliminating the Islamists (i.e., Tunisia), for co-optation (i.e., Morocco) or for a mix of the two strategies. No regime risked a full liberalization that would have included an Islamist party running in competitive elections. The Islamists themselves largely opted for political participation under authoritarian constraints in order to satisfy the “security” guarantees regimes needed (e.g. the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan and Egypt).

While Islamists wanted to avoid being accused of instigating large scale political violence because this would taint the legitimacy and appeal of their cause, the secular opposition realized how little appeal it exercised on average voters. Fearing the Islamists more than the established regimes, vast sectors of secular civil society rallied around the authoritarian elites to ensure the exclusion of Islamists from power.

The international community, relieved that the Army intervened in Algeria, increased its support for authoritarian regimes because it was afraid of the radical ideas of Islamist movements on matters of international politics. The “Algerian scenario” encouraged political actors to try to avoid at all costs the choice between an elected Islamist government and civil war. This balancing act has worked so far, as no other country in the region has gone through what Algeria experienced over the last two decades. However, this does not mean that the continuous exclusion of Islamists from power can work in the future. The current tensions within the international system combined with the renewed legitimacy of jihadist ideology and activism threaten the moderation mainstream Islamists have displayed over recent years and endanger the regimes' balancing acts. Displays of political violence within the Arab world have been increasing, and understanding the origins is of the utmost importance.

This article attempts to provide a brief explanation for the choice of political violence that key Algerian actors made at the time, analyze its impact on policy-makers outside the country, and determine whether there are other useful lessons that can be drawn from the Algerian scenario in order to better understand current events.

Islamist Violence in Algeria

The civil violence affecting Algeria was largely interpreted as the inevitable outcome of the confrontation between the secular and liberal values of many within Algerian society and the inherent anti-democratic and violent nature of political Islam. Thus, General Khaled Nezzar - one of the 1992 military coup masterminds - points to the anti-democratic ethos of the FIS, which would have used the democratic openings to install an *obscurantiste* theocratic state when he claimed that “violence is inherent within Islamism”. [1] Former Minister of Interior El Hadi Khediri agreed with General Nezzar and implied that the initial choice of the FIS to play by the democratic rules was a sham because the “Islamists wanted to take by power by any means”. [2] A number of scholars agree with this view. Ben Mansour claims that “no political party founded on the basis of religion and its instrumental use can be integrated in a republic or in a democracy. And, if it takes power, it is in order to enslave the people and dominate neighbouring states. These parties only feed on violence and war”. [3] Thus, the mainstream explanation for the civil conflict became the “clash of values and methods” that existed between increasingly assertive *facho-Islamistes* and the defenders of secular republicanism. [4]

The popularity of this interpretation has been seldom questioned because of political opportunism. In fact, it relieved the Algerian Army, the sponsors of the coup within civil society and the international community of their responsibilities towards the democratic procedural game. If the FIS was inherently violent and anti-democratic, then there was nothing wrong in stopping it from coming to power even if this meant cancelling the results of free and fair elections. Thus, a coup by the Army was inevitable because it needed to defend secular values and prepare the country for a “genuine” democratic transformation, which could only take place once the Islamist threat was eliminated. Since it was assumed that Islamists simply wanted power with the objective of building a fundamentalist and authoritarian Islamic republic, responding with violence to their scheming would be justified. The military coup was presented as pre-emptive in so far as it responded with violence to the inevitable violence that the FIS would have unleashed on ordinary Algerians not conforming to the dictates of the new Islamic regime. The brutality of the war during the 1990s and in particular the Islamist massacres of 1995 and 1996 seemed to confirm the validity of the above explanation.

This simplistic and self-absolving interpretation should be and has been successfully challenged. On the one hand, many experts on the FIS doubt that the party would have had the internal coherence and the ideological drive to set up a fundamentalist state. Within the FIS there existed a number of different political currents with significant divisions regarding the 'content' of the Islamic state to be built and the policies to be undertaken. On the other hand, Mohamed Hafez convincingly argues that Islamists would not have chosen violence if the democratic processes had not been interrupted and highlights how extremists bent on violence “only gained prominence after the coup put an end to the FIS’s electoral option.” [5]

Islamists who never believed in the electoral process had been marginalised within the FIS and often belonged to groups that had nothing to do with the party. However, following the cancellation of the elections and the arrests of many FIS militants, the ranks of extremist groups swelled. It therefore emerged that the choice of political violence was the result of a changed opportunity structure where Islamists could no longer engage the regime through the political process. This contradicts the mainstream interpretation of the conflict and equally attributes responsibility for the violent turn of Algerian politics.

From the very beginning of the conflict, “the Algerian government invoke[d] the legitimacy of the struggle against terrorism to erase all the political aspects on the crisis in Algeria” [6] and fought the insurgents in the name of defending the values of democracy, secularism, and enlightenment. [7] However, upon closer inspection, it became clear that the generals charged with derailing the democratic process and fighting the insurgents mostly acted to achieve personal political survival and material privileges. [8] This does not mean that genuine concerns about the FIS were not widespread, particularly among the secular and liberal sectors of civil society. In fact, many of its most prominent representatives supported the Army's crackdown. This should not however obscure the fact that halting the process of democratisation served also the material benefits of many within the ruling elites.

It is interesting to note that the claim of fighting terrorism in the name of democratic and secular values handsomely paid off for those promoting such a policy. The international community not only turned a blind eye on the abuses of the security forces, but actively supported the regime and its efforts to stamp out the insurgency and fully eliminate Islamism from Algeria. [9]

From this brief analysis of the reasons behind the explosion of violence in Algeria, it emerges that it would be mistaken to see it simply as the product of an inevitable clash of values between liberal democracy and religious fundamentalism. This was however precisely the interpretation which was privileged outside Algeria. This framework of interpretation of Islamist violence found renewed validity after September 11th when the Algerian government claimed that the United States was now facing the same enemy that Algeria had been fighting with since 1992.

The External Effects of the Algerian War

As mentioned above, the Algerian civil war had a profound impact on the international community. The neighbouring Arab states immediately took steps to ensure that such a scenario would not occur in their countries. Some rulers such as Bin Ali in Tunisia decided that the process of democratic transformation that he had initiated should be immediately reversed as it might benefit the Islamists. He jailed or exiled the cadres of the Islamist party while smashing its social and political networks. In Morocco, the King introduced some democratic reforms, ensuring the co-optation of sections of political Islam while outlawing its more radical elements. In Jordan, the monarch marginalised the Islamic Action Front politically, but did not threaten its existence. Other Arab countries dealt with their own Islamists adopting one or all of the above methods according to local circumstances.

Western countries, grateful for the Algerian Army’s intervention, decided that political Islam did indeed represent a significant threat to their interests in the region and supported whatever measures the local ruling elites adopted to deal with Islamist parties. Accordingly, very few concluded that the democratic process in Algeria should in fact have been allowed to take its course. While it is impossible to say that civil war would have been avoided if the FIS had been permitted to win the second round of elections, form a government, and run the country; there were strong indications that ordinary FIS members and voters would have not joined armed groups if their party of choice had been in power.

What emerges from the analysis of political violence in Algeria is that this was the outcome of a rational decision-making process on the part of many disillusioned citizens. The jihadist ideology was not particularly popular in Algeria at the time. Indeed, the main ideological current within the FIS was “Algerianist”, which proposed a specific Algerian Islamism imbued with democratic notions as the solution to the country's problems. It was the denial of political opportunity that led to the choice of violence among Islamists. While this does not in any way excuse the ensuing brutality of the insurgency, it should be recognised that the decision to claim political rights through violence was both logical and rational.

This interpretative framework is analytically beneficial because it allows one to examine Islamist parties and Islamist voters as all other political parties are within the comparative politics literature. Thus, it should be assumed that Islamists make rational choices about their behaviour in light of the structure of incentives they are presented with. When this opportunity structure changes, they shift and adapt to it. Faced with an uncompromising regime that had just “robbed” it of a legitimate electoral victory, and suffering from the heavy handed repression of the security forces, it is of no surprise that the armed struggle became the only viable option for the FIS and its militants.

The Algerian Experience: Lessons for Today

There a number of points emerging from an alternative reading of the “Algerian scenario.” First of all, it should be noted that Islamist political violence certainly feeds off a violent and uncompromising jihadist ideology, but the Algerian case demonstrates quite clearly that political circumstances matter a great deal in leading ordinary citizens to choose and support violence. The international community, intent on promoting democracy in the region, has focused on a number of different aspects ranging from constitutional reforms to changes in the human rights legislation to strengthening civil society activism. [10] Although all these are positive objectives, allowing citizens to choose their rulers should be the priority for all those who are genuinely interested in promoting democracy. While democratic governance does not eliminate in itself acts of terrorism or ensure against more widespread political violence, it is the first necessary step to legitimise the political system. [11] Those who would then oppose it through violence could be truly termed “terrorists”. Islamist parties should be allowed to compete in free and fair elections and allowed to govern if citizens decide so.

A second point related once again to the importance of the political system in place is that when examining how violence breaks out, it is crucial to look at the institutional setting in place and how it affects and constrains the Islamist movements. With the exception of a few committed jihadists, violence and terrorism are not the default options of Islamists. While all Islamists can be considered "radical" because their political programme entails the complete transformation of the social, economic, and political relationships in the societies they operate in, very few would pursue their political objectives through violence. Political radicalism does not necessarily have to take violent forms and the vast majority of Islamist movements thrive because of their charitable activism and political participation.

Finally, it is important to understand the reasons for the surge of Islamism and how it can shift from peaceful to violent. In Algeria, poverty, lack of employment prospects, and a feeling of humiliation *vis à vis* the powers that be all contributed to the growth and appeal of the FIS, which promised to rid the country of corruption, reinstate economic benefits for the masses, and provide an alternative to the current social relationships based on patronage. In addition, the FIS promised a more radical and confrontational foreign policy that would upset the major powers on the international scene. When the opportunity to see these electoral promises implemented was taken away, the internal dynamics of Algerian Islamism changed, moving away from political participation and towards armed struggle.

The 'Swamp' of Islamism

In the end the Algerian regime was able to deal with the challenge of the insurgency and effectively put an end to the threat to its stability by 1997. However, it has failed to deal with the very causes of the rise of Islamism such as poverty, corruption and authoritarianism. This does not bode well for the future of Algeria and for the other Arab countries.

Algeria, at least superficially, is today a very different country from the one that the October 1988 riots shook so strongly. The Algerian economy has changed considerably and the country has fully embraced the neo-liberal economic agenda jettisoning its socialist past. At the political level, the one-party rule does not exist any longer and it has been replaced with formal political pluralism and regular multi-party and multi-candidate elections. At international level, Algeria is now a privileged partner of both the United States and the European Union whereas twenty years ago it was a close ally of the Soviet Union and a leading member of the non-aligned movement, promoting anti-imperialism and "third-worldism".

Although the change is evident, it is not as profound as may seem. While the economy has formally embraced free-market capitalism, this is built on the distribution of oil and gas rents through networks of patronage. The wealth generated from high rents has largely failed to trickle down and has fallen instead into the hands of an entrepreneurial class intimately linked to the regime. Thus, despite generational changes, the mechanisms for the accumulation of wealth still are still linked to networks of clientelism. [12] In addition, the indicators for inflation and unemployment are still high and opportunities limited even for university graduates. The political system, despite the formal trappings of democracy, is authoritarian and dominated by generals who act behind the scenes to shape the political system to suite their needs. [13] The prominent political role of the intelligence and security services empties of any significance the role of elected officials. While the Algerian regime might have renounced anti-imperialism, siding with the United States and the European Union on a number of important international issues contrasts sharply with the rising anti-American sentiment in the country.

All this points to the lack of legitimacy that the current ruling elites enjoy and indicates that there is a vast gulf between the appearance of Algeria as a stable semi-democracy with a functioning market economy and the reality. It is because of this gulf that Islamism still exercises considerable appeal for ordinary citizens. While it has been driven largely underground, it still represents a significant challenge and once the legacy of the 1990s civil war will have faded, [14] it is likely to come back with a vengeance. The creation of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb might just be the first sign.

Conclusion

Democracy is not the panacea to political violence that many argue it is. Democracy does not ensure against terrorism and does not protect the country from domestic violent challenges. Thus, it would be mistaken to argue that the arrival of democracy in Algeria and elsewhere in the Arab world would lead to the immediate dismantling of terrorist networks. Moreover, the case is strengthened if we take into account that much of the recent political violence seems to be linked to international factors rather than to domestic ones.

All this however should not stop one from arguing that the instauration of democracy is the necessary first step to building a legitimate domestic political order that in the long run will ensure the marginalisation of violent groups. Twenty years ago, Algeria attempted to democratise and it failed to consolidate its progress because an Islamist party was going to be the main beneficiary of regime change. Secular sectors of the domestic polity and the international community sanctioned a “democracy-saving” military coup. The outcome of the Army's intervention has been a brutal civil war and a legacy of authoritarian rule where the socio-economic and cultural situation that gave rise to the FIS is still very much alive.

Algeria, despite its high oil rents and its international role, is not a stable country and domestic discontent can be easily exploited by violent groups. As Roberts [15] argues, a “demilitarisation of the regime” is necessary and while a new process of genuine democratisation might indeed once again reward a radical Islamist party, living with it this time would be the best option. The alternative is that the memory of the 1990s civil war will fade and that a new generation will decide again that violence against the regime and society is more rational than living life as a marginal member of the polity with no political voice and no socio-economic benefits.

Francesco Cavatorta is a lecturer in International Relations and Middle East politics at the School of Law and Government, Dublin City University, Dublin, Ireland.

NOTES:

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[11] K. Dalacoura, ‘Islamist Terrorism and the Middle East democratic deficit: political exclusion, repression and the causes of extremism’ in Frédéric Volpi and Francesco Cavatorta (eds.) *Democratization in the Muslim world*, Oxon, Routledge, 2007.
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Opinion Brief: Wars of Our Own Creation

By Sherifa Zuhur

Various Western government spokespersons or policy “professionals” have argued that we are witnessing “an internal struggle within Islam, pitting those who espouse a particular orthodoxy against those who seek a reformation of Islam.” [1] Essentially, a battle between moderates and radicals. But who are the moderates, exactly? Why are they increasingly defined as those who support the West, secularists, or those who do not observe mainstream Muslim practices? Is this not a Western perception of moderation, informed by a discrete historical and political self-analysis that is superimposed on the Muslim world? Moreover, do moderates always seek a reformation of Islam? Or do they identify in some ways with bin Ladin’s anti-Americanism? Can they be better described, or do they overlap with other categories of Muslims like traditionalists, conservatives, or non-violent Islamists? [2]

“Strengthening the moderates” in the Muslim world has been a consistent policy slogan since 2001. One important study suggests that we build on the “success” of the West in the Cold War by creating a new breed of Muslims – the “moderates” we want, instead of the moderates that we actually find in the region. Indeed, these will not be “moderates”, but rather are intended to be Muslim secularists who will promote policies and changes in Muslim societies that synchronize with U.S. goals and strategic communications.

The idea of an Islam struggling without a Luther - an Orientalist and essentialist vision of a backwards culture - is a very useful way to demonize an entire culture. Even Benazir Bhutto may go down in history as a moderate martyr to extremism when in fact, many other factors such as regionalism, foreign interference, and lack of democracy have contributed to the vacuum of power in Pakistan. In Europe, we see how television plays on the idea of a struggle “within” Islam as Christiane Amanpour narrates in “The Moderates Fight Back”, a segment of the series “The War Within”. [3]

Amanpour’s particular focus on Muslims debating in Ireland made it evident to viewers that moderates are not radicals. However, it didn’t clarify the spectrum of Muslim moderate positions on a wide variety of issues. For example, Westerners often consider Muslim women who do not wear *hijab* to be moderates, or “secularists” when in fact, they may be neither. At the same time, other Muslims increasingly criticize them, or even allude to their being non-Muslims or false Muslims. Furthermore, for a woman to claim the right to political leadership, as Bhutto did, signifies a challenge to the principle of male *hukm* (arbitration, judgment, ability to serve as an authority)– automatically identified such a woman as a non-conservative. Moderates in Muslim-majority and minority countries do not speak with one voice on these issues, or indeed many others.

Unfortunately, mainstream Muslims - large numbers of whom are Islamists - do not fit the prevailing American definition of “moderate”. A person who follows the five pillars of Islam, celebrates Muslim holidays, attends a mosque, eschews alcohol and pork, wears Islamic dress or is bearded, and does not date is simply following basic religious principles. But, in the post 9/11 environment, and probably prior to it, such a person has been treated as being “extreme” when living in Muslim minority countries. Furthermore, there are expectations in the business, professional, governmental, and media environments that Muslims will express the public culture of others; in the United States, the bland geniality and lack of emotion expected of the white, male, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant elite. Therefore, Muslim commentators often appear, argumentative, didactic or at least expressive, and “extreme”.

Expectations that Muslims should essentially be secularists, embrace Western cultural values, avoid condemning Israel withhold support of the Palestinian cause, or enthusiastically back American foreign policy in the Muslim world are highly impractical and unrealistic measures of “moderation.”. A more literal interpretation of “moderation” or “centrist” might be helpful, rather than equating this category to all that is not Islamist, or secularist-assimilationist, as in numerous US Government and think tank approaches.

The antithesis of a “moderate” could be that new, ugly term, “Islamofascist”, which to my dismay seems to include all Islamists. Some experts and sources have for years, defined moderates as “anti-Islamist” Muslims. [4] Campus Watch - a project of the Middle East Forum, and founded by Daniel Pipes - has vilified important Muslim thinkers and academic experts who are considered “moderate” by their peers, regional experts, and Muslim and non-Muslim academics. This approach has gone beyond Campus Watch’s McCarthyesque website to a book that castigates 101 prominent American academics, including those who are too defensive of Islam or

Islamists in sheep's clothing. [5]

We should consider the views of "mainstream" pious Muslims, not only those who have rejected Islam as the primary focus of their lives. Among these, we need to acknowledge that a majority in the Muslim world want to retain their identity, and in some cases serve as a positive voice for stricter observance of their faith. They may not fall in the camp who is content to relegate their identity and faith to the private sphere. They might not be able to do so, either, because of the Islamization of the region that has taken place over the last three decades.

Moderate Islamists, like radicals and also many non-Islamist actors, reject Western (American and European) political dominance, and cannot but disapprove of American and European foreign policy in the Middle East today with its transformative dimension. However, they opt for education and *da'wa* to promote their cause as opposed to a violent approach. One symbol of their position (copied on occasion by non-Islamists like President Mubarak) is that they do not wear ties, symbols of the Western business world.

The Ikhwan, or Muslim Brotherhood, is the best organized and largest element of political opposition in Egypt today. Furthermore, it is the parent to organizational branches from Jordan to the Sudan, including Hamas. Three propositions have been made about the Ikhwan [6] by academics who study them, their own spokespersons, and their critics:

> (1) [from academics] If they were permitted to operate as a legal political party in Egypt, this would serve to moderate the Party's positions and weaken the salafists and other extremists
> (2) [from Brethren and Hamas] The Brotherhood (like Hamas) has always been intended to function as a broad socio-religious movement which must, of necessity, go beyond politics; but which can operate even when barred from political legitimacy and
> (3)[from critics] The Muslim Brotherhood is simply not sufficiently "moderate" as evinced in their recently published platform, Barnamig al-Hizb. [7]

While critics point out the proposed role of a Council of 'Ulama in the platform, and the exclusion of Christians or women as potential presidential candidates, one might remember that such ideas are not anathema to many Muslims - they emanate from commonly shared notions of good governance via consultation or *shura*. As for suspicion of women presidential candidates, well, many Americans seem to be right in synch with male-dominated Muslim society, and Egypt's regime-backed National Democratic Party has never and probably will never forward any female presidential candidates and yes, the role of non-Muslims (*dhimma*) continues to be a problematic aspect of a proposed, idealized Islamic state. But is this worse than the current situation for religious minorities in other actual Islamic states? Political observers, take heed! This platform was not formulated with the input of all Brotherhood leaders -- `Isam al-Arian for instance, was imprisoned when it was issued; and it was issued "for discussion." Still, it represents a shift from prior positions of the Ikwhan in Egypt even if it is a little further to the right than those of today's Ikhwan or Hamas moderates. [8]

In addition to these moderates are hundreds of thousands of other Muslims who, however, cannot possibly be termed Muslim liberals. Defining moderates as assimilationists who reject the *shari`ah* and other key aspects of religious identity, wear coats and ties, and embrace Israel is just too much to ask of the Muslim world today. Defining Islamist moderates (and those who write about them) as terrorists, and inhibiting their capacity to pursue other tactics may cost us all dearly.

Sherifa Zuhur is Research Professor of Islamic and Regional Studies at the Strategic Studies Institute located at the U.S. Army War College at Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania, U.S.A.

NOTES:

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[5] David Horowitz, The Professors: The 101 Most Dangerous Academics in America. Washington, D.C. Regnery Publishing, 2006. The author's other targets of this book are Afrocentric black intellectuals, and gays.

[6] Sherifa Zuhur, Egypt: Security, Islamist, and Political Challenges. Carlisle Barracks: Strategic Studies Institute, 2007, http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs/display.cfm?pubID=787
See pp. 53-55, 57, 64, 68-72, 88, 91-93, 97-101, 103.
[7] The use of the term hizb or "party" implies the crystallization of this shift in the Ikhwan's self-conception, despite the continued assertions of the Ikhwan's multi-dimensional role.
[8] See quotations in Sherifa Zuhur, "The Summit: Milestone or Mirage?" Strategic Studies Institute Newsletter, October 9, 2007, http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/Pubs/Display.Cfm?pubID=824

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