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Political Islam in the Mediterranean: the view from democratization studies

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Contemporary perceptions of, and responses to, the growth of political Islam on the southern shores of the Mediterranean are still heavily influenced by traditional orientalist views on ‘Islam’ and by realist notions of regional security. This situation contributes to the formation of predominantly state-centric responses to what is perceived to be a monolithic Islamist threat. The issues of democratization and democracy promotion are downplayed in the face of security concerns. When addressed, liberal-inspired views of democracy and civil society are nonetheless problematically deployed in a social and political context that does not duplicate well the conditions met in previous ‘waves’ of successful democratization elsewhere. The prospects for democratization are linked to a situation where moderate Islamist movements are expected to endorse liberal-democratic values – albeit reluctantly and by default – and where state-imposed constraints on political liberalization can only slow down the process of implementation of electoral democracy. Far too little attention is paid to the alternative forms of participation that are devised locally by Islamists, as well as to the relevance of standard electoral processes in the context of refined authoritarian systems.

Keywords: democracy; orientalism; Islamism; international relations; security; Middle East politics

Introduction: influences on the study of democratization in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA)

Over the last few decades, the issue of the absence of recognizable forms of liberal democracy in most Muslim-majority countries has been at the centre of much debate in both political science and foreign policy. In the preceding decades, political Islam was not deemed to be a research topic worthy of much social science inquiry and was seen as something better left to orientalist scholars with regional interests. The most emblematic Islamic political movement of the twentieth century, the Muslim Brotherhood, hardly featured on the political science landscape

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until the 1960s.¹ In practice, political science studies on Islamic movements, when they existed, received little attention before the 1979 Iranian revolution. Then, in the space of two decades, political Islam moved from being viewed as an anachronism to being considered one of the leading features of political life and institutional change in the region.² From the mid-1980s onward, there has been an exponential growth of two comparatively new bodies of literature attempting to explain political change in the Muslim world: democratization studies and studies of Islamism. These two types of expertise met after the end of the cold war in the so-called 'third wave' of democratization, when many believed that authoritarian regimes worldwide would quickly disappear to be replaced by Western-style, liberal democracies.³

Due to the largely disappointing results of democratization in most Muslim-majority polities, and in particular in the Middle East and North Africa, scholars and policy-makers have concentrated their attention on what might cause the continuing absence of substantial democratic reforms in those parts of the world.⁴ Repeatedly, the most conspicuous answers to the lack of 'progress', liberalism, and democracy in Muslim polities have been that it is a consequence of the intrinsically regressive and authoritarian precepts of Islam as a system of belief(s) and social organization, and/or a result of the political and socio-economic backwardness of these countries. These issues became a global concern in the post-9/11 period when the radical edge of political Islam began to present itself as a new international security challenge for the dominant state actors.

At about the same time, many analyses of democratization began to shift the grounds of their inquiries toward more empirical methods of political assessment. They refocused their attention to practical dilemmas about political Islamization and democratization, rather than meta-questions about Islam and democracy.⁵ These analyses became concerned with the issue of the practical role played by Islamist movements as institutional actors for political mobilization, and not with the more diffuse cultural and religious underpinnings of social identification. In the years of the 'war on terror', democracy and democracy promotion were reaffirmed in connection with the dominant institutions and practices of 'really existing' liberal democracies. Serious considerations on what might constitute viable, democratic alternatives to this prevailing model receded into the background.

In the following, I analyse the above mentioned trends in order to highlight the internal dynamics of the study of democratization in Muslim polities, particularly those on the southern shores of the Mediterranean, and how this is relayed into the field of policy-making. In the first section, I look at the heritage of orientalism and its role in constructing Islam and, later, political Islam as unitary objects of analysis in the region. In the second section, I examine the 'realist' legacy of the Cold War, as a power-focused, state-centric set of narratives, and its influence on the growth of democratization studies from the mid-1980s onwards. In the third section, I assess the debates on civil society that are prevalent in the 'third wave' of democratization and outline how this idea (and ideal) is deployed in connection to political Islam in MENA polities. In the fourth section, I detail

the mechanisms that are commonly invoked to explain how and why democratization is currently caught up in a 'grey zone' in the Muslim world, and particularly on the southern shores of the Mediterranean.

Legacies of orientalism

It is instructive first to approach the issue of political Islam and democracy in the Muslim context from an orientalist perspective. By orientalism, I mean an approach to Islam that tries to build a comprehensive and systematic picture of an Islamic civilization, with its own logic and system of values.⁶ Admittedly, this Islamic narrative is being analysed and explained through the lenses of western concepts and methodologies. Yet, as long as these concepts and methods are presented as rational universals, orientalist accounts have no particular difficulty in making their case. They are firmly in the lineage of the positivist social sciences of the nineteenth century and have a clear, realist epistemology. There is an object out there called 'Islam', or the 'Muslims', which can be the object of systematic study; and the task of orientalist scholarship is precisely to contribute, little by little, to providing the grand picture of the internal workings of this phenomenon or society.

As both critiques and proponents of this scholarship have argued repeatedly, there is little doubt that traditional orientalists had (and in some cases have) a sophisticated knowledge of many aspects of the fields that they studied. Indeed, in the early days of social science investigation of the Middle East, it seemed difficult to move beyond orientalism. Manfred Halpern's approach in the 1960s is a clear illustration of this trend.⁷ Rather than directly questioning the narratives put forward by traditional orientalists, he attempted to supplement them with more empirical analyses of political behaviour in the postcolonial states of the region. Reviewing the orientalist scholarship of the 1950s, Halpern stated unambiguously that in his view, 'it would be quite impossible for students of political modernization to do any sensible work without, for example, drawing upon the works of H.A.R. Gibb, Gustave von Grunebaum, or Wilfred Cantwell Smith'.⁸ Hence, he was concerned with developing a 'new orientology', more attuned to the paradigms of modern political science and based more in quantitative methods of analyses than was previously the case. Halpern did not see a fundamental contradiction between these two approaches; rather, he envisioned a complementary relationship – one that fully appreciated the orientalist heritage. Indeed, social and political science experts in the 1960s and 1970s, from Leonard Binder to Dankwart Rustow, would mainly provide more empirically grounded elaboration of traditional, 'ex cathedra' orientalist arguments about the dynamics of the political culture of the MENA.⁹

For those authors in the political science tradition, the main legacy of orientalism has a dual philosophical and political set of implications. First, from a philosophical perspective, orientalist scholarship seeks to (re)construct a paradigmatic reading of Islam that structures the freedom of action of Muslim social and

political actors; what they can or cannot do and say, what they should or should not do and say. This is contrasted to a similarly rigid account of liberal democratic principles that cannot accommodate, or be accommodated by, the Islamic tradition in some of its most fundamental characteristics. While traditional orientalism focused on religious and theological exegesis, contemporary, 'neo-orientalist' analysts concentrate instead on the politicized pronouncements of various Islamic ideologues, as well as the performative media dimension of their discourse. Second, from a political perspective, orientalist approaches are connecting these philosophical/theological interpretations directly to political practice. This perspective argues that because this is what the leaderships of Islamist movements think, this is how politics will be organized by an Islamist regime, therefore, this is what foreign policy and international alignment will be like, and so on. This (neo-)orientalist take on Islam accommodates itself well to, and is also constitutive of, a traditional realist (or neorealist) account of power construction and projection in international relations theory.

Seen from outside the region, political Islam was, for most of the Cold War, merely a dependent variable of political change. In MENA settings, where 'realist' theories of international relations appear to be quite adequate to account for external state behaviour, and where modernization theory was meant to encapsulate the direction of societal change internally. In this context, for decidedly orientalist scholars like Elie Kedourie or Bernard Lewis, the democratization debate is a non-starter, both because of the weight of the Islamic tradition and because Islamist ideologues and leaders repeatedly speak openly against the idea of democracy.¹⁰ Such analyses emphasize the utilization of key theological resources of Islam to undermine the basic concepts of democratic organization, like popular sovereignty. As such, these approaches are attempting to frame the domestic and international politics of Muslim-majority societies in relation to a fairly unitary notion of 'national interest', defined on the basis of Islamist ideology.

For more political science-minded authors, the merging of orientalist scholarship and the study of political behaviour remains largely under-scrutinized and/or is waved away as commonsensical. Thus, in an often-consulted textbook about Middle Eastern politics from the 1970s and 1980s, James Bill and Carl Leiden could argue that 'despite all the differences that separate Middle Eastern leaders and elites, there are in the Muslim world a number of deep seated and persisting similarities in rule'.¹¹ They suggested that these similarities 'have existed throughout Islamic history and can be traced to the days of the Prophet Muhammad, himself the model par excellence of political leadership'. Thus Bill and Leiden could conclude that since 'millions of Muslims continue to pattern their lives after his, it is not surprising, therefore, that twentieth-century Muslim political leaders often have styles and use strategies that are very similar to those instituted by the Prophet Muhammad in Arabia some 1,400 years ago'.¹² These 'commonsense' approaches to political culture in the MENA were not, in fact, proposing an analysis of political elites and of the institutional organization of the postcolonial state in the region. Yet, there were already accounts, such as Michael Hudson's

study of the legitimization crisis in the Arab world, which actually did provide this kind of detailed and careful explanation of political order (and its failures) in the region.¹³ Nor did these narratives propose a more historically-construed investigation into the survival and modernization of tribal and religious modes of governance, which various studies of 'neo-*asabiyya*' processes provided.¹⁴ Rather, what was invoked in the kind of analyses that Bill and Leiden (and many others) proposed at that time was a set of culturalist assumptions, which are at best supported by tenuous historical correlations. For example, how does the above-mentioned argument apply to secularized, modernist Middle Eastern elites, who only make perfunctory and rhetorical uses of the examples set by the Prophet? Alternatively, how is one able to specify what constitutes a specifically Islamic model of leadership: Is it to be a reference to the constitution of Medina? Is it the entire life of the Prophet himself? Does it include the time of the first few caliphs (the so-called Golden Age of Islam)? And so on.

For domestic politics, because the notion that modernization and secularization of institutions and, more generally, of social life was the preferred, developmental paradigm for Muslim polities, a comparison of these transformations with democratic developments in the 'West' was not only useful for understanding what was happening, but was, in fact, necessary to explain it. Resistance to the secularization and modernization of social and political life was deemed largely futile before the 1979 Iranian revolution. As Daniel Lerner's well-known comment indicated it appeared to be a straightforward choice between 'Mecca and mechanization'.¹⁵ In effect, it was not even a choice at all since Lerner and many others fully anticipated that the religious glue of Muslim societies would be dissolved by modernization. Some less sanguine observers, like Abu-Lughod, noted however, that since these processes were often forcefully implemented by authoritarian regimes, a return of the repressed social and political forces, particularly Islamic ones, was likely to happen at some point and provide a corrective to this trend.¹⁶ By and large, however, this corrective was not actually deemed to be significant enough to warrant much research and thinking on the topic at that time. It was not until well after the Iranian revolution that scholars began to consider the overstretching of the modernization/secularization theory, especially when it was applied to largely under-studied social forces in Muslim-majority countries.¹⁷

Ending the Cold War: democracy as a peculiar dilemma of Middle Eastern politics

At a substantive level, interpretations of political Islam remained on the whole a second order tool of analysis for most of the 1980s since the bipolar dynamics of the Cold War were viewed as the first order *explanandum* in the (greater) Middle Eastern context. In international relations, the specificities of Muslim-majority countries were for a long time subsumed under a regionalist approach to Middle East politics.¹⁸ This area-study perspective was, in turn, structured

for a long time by the dominant (neo)realist paradigms of the Cold War. Even when supplemented by a dose of neo-liberal analyses, such a 'realist' take on the Muslim world is key to understanding the evolution of the democratization debates from the mid-1980s onwards. Illustrative of this situation are the views on the 'third wave' of democratization that Samuel Huntington presents in his analysis of the Middle Eastern/Islamic democratization conundrums. From his 1984 article 'Will More Countries Become Democratic' to his 1991 book *The Third Wave*, Huntington views the spread of liberal democracy to the Middle East and the Muslim world as a problematic process, but not for conceptual reasons.¹⁹ He does not see Islamism as providing a concrete and realistic alternative to liberal democratic institutional models for the region. He warns against a particularly difficult set of structural factors stacking up against a smooth and rapid democratization sequence in many key Muslim-majority countries. Yet, he argues that this situation only points to a quantitatively bigger problem rather than to a qualitatively different democratization dilemma.²⁰ Huntington's account from the 1980s (like his civilizational narrative in the 1990s) proposes some 'obvious' generalizations about Muslim politics, underpinned by orientalist scholarship, that rely on very little else than correlations; and these correlations remain to be explained since they do not constitute explanations in themselves.

This strand of thinking, as well as the tendency to merge *explanan* and *explanandum*, continues unabated after the Cold War when it comes to analysing Muslim politics. Many democratization specialists do not seriously revise their positions regarding the Muslim world and one notices instead an increased polarization between approaches to democratization in the region.²¹ This polarization is informed by the debate in the sociology of religion that emphasizes the (partial) deprivatization of religion.²² The undermining of the edifice of modernization theory that many analysts had used to frame their understanding of social and political change in the MENA, led to even more exceptionalist explanations of Muslim exceptionalism. In particular, there is a new set of more pessimistic interpretations of the prospects for liberal democratization in the Muslim world shaped by the idea of the emergence of a political order based on political Islam. In Huntington's narrative, this is illustrated by the revision of his argument about quantitative resistances into a qualitative clash of 'civilizations'.²³ In a not too dissimilar mould, Adrian Karatnycky's review of the Freedom House Survey trends in 2001 stresses that Muslim-majority societies remain the most resistant to the spread of democracy and, quoting Lewis approvingly on the paucity of the democratic lexicon in Arabic and Persian, refers back to the idea that it simply takes time and efforts for democratic principles to take root in an Islamic political culture.²⁴ This over-reliance on some vague notion of 'Islamic political culture' as a generic explanation provides a common thread between modernization accounts of the 1950s and 1960s, the realist analyses of the Cold War, and the post-Cold War narratives about Muslim democratic exceptionalism.²⁵

Up to the end of the Cold War, such loose references to political Islam only served to buttress a state-centric narrative about Middle Eastern politics as

realpolitik in a realist/neorealist regional order. Immediately after the collapse of the USSR and the rise of Islamic militancy in Central Asia, the notion of a 'Greater Middle East' even gained popularity as a means of bringing the new Central Asian republics within a known frame of reference. This meant that explanations emphasized traditional security practices, such as the role of military alliances with nationalist autocrats to secure oil resources and hold Islamism in check.²⁶ Although sometimes presented as an exception to the dominant realist paradigm, the activities of the European Union (EU), especially in relation to the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, had difficulties in moving beyond a sophisticated realist model for politics in the region. This is due not least to the fact that the EU had difficulty conceiving what the Mediterranean should be as a region.²⁷ As Pace indicates in this special issue, the EU has considerable difficulties not only in turning theory into practice, but also in thinking through a coherent, conceptual approach for its multiple policy initiatives at the regional level. EU officials generally wish to emphasize a 'soft power' approach to reforming institutions and practices in the region instead of imposing some new rules of the game. Yet, they do resort to arm-twisting tactics whenever the circumstances appear to demand it (for example, in trade negotiations, in the recognition of Hamas). This 'realist' tendency has been more visible in EU policies after 9/11 as the dynamics of securitization became more prominent within both the EU zone and the Mediterranean region, especially when Islamist movements are involved, since they remain an unknown quantity for EU institutions.²⁸

Fred Halliday noted how, in the post-Cold War context, the debates about political Islam in the Middle East became polarized between 'essentialist' and 'contingencist' strands of arguments.²⁹ Essentialists develop an argument with a strong orientalist flavour that posits that the 'fundamentals' of Islam are the reason for systemic and systematic clashes with western notions of liberal democracy. Contingencists, on the other hand, argue that, like any other religious doctrine, Islam is malleable enough to be conceptually and practically interpreted in such a way that the areas of frictions with liberal notions of democracy are minimal in the right circumstances. Such polarized views remain common mainly because analysts in each 'camp' have embarked upon rather different kinds of intellectual endeavours that cannot be unified by mere reference to the 'data'. From an international relations perspective, various neo-orientalist and neorealist approaches repeatedly try to establish a causal link between (liberal) democracy and political Islam (or Islam *tout court*) in order to show the incompatibility (or occasionally compatibility) of these two organizing principles of social and political life. Meanwhile, their post-orientalist and constructivist opponents engage with them on those same terms. For the former, the task is to construct a usable framework for constructing/representing 'national interests' from the discourse on political Islam and, therefore, to find unity in diversity. For the latter, the task is to unmask the alternative articulations of Islamic discourses and show where and when the resources of the Islamic tradition can be re-articulated

synergistically with other resources, including those from the liberal democratic tradition.

These opposing perspectives parallel the disagreements in democratization studies between, on the one hand, those agency-based, transitology studies in the fashion of Guillermo O'Donnell and Phillipe Schmitter that became fashionable in the mid-1980s and, on the other hand, those slightly older, structure-based accounts of democratization that have their roots in modernization theory.³⁰ For essentialist-minded writers, the core characteristics of the Islamic and liberal-democratic tradition are simply too dissimilar to ever allow individuals to build a polity that would satisfy both sets of skills and expectations; no matter how much *fortuna* and *virtu* one may have. For contingencist-minded authors, given the right circumstances, individuals and groups can find interpretations of their religious principles that interact synergistically, rather than conflict with, liberal-democratic practices and institutions. Evidently, the mere possibility of a convergence does not imply that it will necessarily happen in practice. Some of the key post-orientalist narratives of the 1990s, from Kepel's *The Revenge of God* to Roy's *The Failure of Political Islam*, did in fact emphasize a sizeable chasm between the two traditions, as well as the continuing relevance of an 'Iranian model' or an 'Algerian scenario' type of Islamist takeover.³¹ As ever, simply referring to the 'facts of life' in the region does not provide a way of resolving such a dilemma. Because of the limited numbers of examples and counter examples invoked in each instance, what counts as meaningful generalization and what is meant to be an exception is strongly determined by the type of explanation that the analysts want to put forward in the first instance.

Democratization in Turkey can be used as a useful illustration of how either narrative can be supported by political transformations in a polity. For analysts attributing a benign role to political Islam, the fact that the country has been governed by political parties with strong Islamist inclinations in 1996–1997 and since 2002 is a clear indication that democratization can proceed smoothly even in the presence of a substantial Islamic political discourse. Yet Turkey also proclaims its republican credentials loud and clear, and it promotes its own brand of republicanism, Kemalism, as the state ideology. On the basis of the latter aspects of the political evolution of Turkey, some authors are able to articulate developmentalist and primordialist arguments about the relationship between Islamism and modern liberal democracies. Lewis has long argued that there is a prior requirement for a radical change in frames of reference for the conduct of democratic politics, since even words such as 'citizen' and 'citizenship' had, until recently, no direct equivalent in the Arabic, Persian or Turkic languages.³² From this perspective, the current situation in Turkey is not an example of Islamic moderation, but an illustration of the successes of political secularization. Even though one may agree with some of the historical points made by orientalist scholars, it should be noted that such a developmentalist approach is linked to the construction of an 'oriental' approach to modern liberal democracy. 'Contingencists' might reply that actual words are less important than the meanings that they

acquire politically over time. Clearly, the western political lexicon has long possessed those terms, but their political meaning has been changed and recreated from the Enlightenment onwards to resonate with the new practices corresponding to the modern liberal democratic ethos.³³

To avoid such conceptual dilemmas, some comparative studies within political science have attempted to leave semantic issues behind and simply to take into account political and social preferences in the contemporary context. From the mid-1990s onward, there has been an increasingly fashionable strand of survey-based studies that investigate the attitudes of 'Muslims' toward 'democracy' in order to assess the degree of compatibility between the two. A wide array of more or less well-designed surveys, as well as more rigorous political analyses, outline how the religious beliefs held by the citizenry in various parts of the Muslim world do not in themselves seem to preclude people from taking an interest in 'democracy'.³⁴ Although this approach has the advantage of avoiding the pseudo-philosophical problems that flourished in the earlier debates by focusing on what a substantial number of people actually say, it faces a different kind of definitional problem. Repeatedly the notion of democracy is taken to be not only a fixed concept, but also a self-evident one. Hence, these analyses do not particularly focus on what respondents actually mean when they use the words that are put in front of them by researchers. Rather, a very malleable notion of liberal democracy is alluded to in connection to a set of basic social and political preferences that are put forward for consideration by the surveys' respondents. Because of the very nature of data obtained, these analyses do not and cannot describe the deliberative processes that produce a substantive account of what a word such as 'democracy' actually means. The lack of characterization of these key concepts undermines the explanatory powers of the analyses, regardless of their descriptive capabilities. Clearly, 'democracy' and 'democratization' are far more fashionable political terms than they were 20 years ago. Yet the mere presence of a practical interest in democratization throughout the Muslim world today does not allow analysts to make many direct political forecasts.

Beyond the 'democratization paradigm' for political Islam in the MENA

Trying to measure 'really existing democracy' in the Muslim world has created a new set of dilemmas. Two types of related, but distinct, contemporary debates have emerged to address these new issues, as illustrated by the contributions to this volume. The first set of arguments is attuned to the development of democratization studies in the 1980s and 1990s and focuses on civic activism and the role of civil society in political transformations. The second type of debate has a longer tradition in development studies and focuses on the structural impediments to democratization, primarily from socio-economic and politico-military perspectives.

There are evidently different types of 'civil society' or 'civil sphere' in different parts of the Muslim world, but the debates have commonly been

polarized between those who view the MENA region as just another setting for the kind of civil society revival that was witnessed in Latin America and in Eastern and Southern Europe, and those who emphasize the distinctiveness of the Muslim and/or MENA context. Thus, for the followers of Ernest Gellner's *Conditions of Liberty*, whatever associative life there may exist in Muslim polities, they are not of the 'right' kind and, therefore, unpropitious to the emergence of a genuine liberal democratic order.³⁵ By contrast, those influenced by the work of Augustus Norton and his collaborators in *Civil Society in the Middle East* emphasize the presence of a recognizably liberal civil society impulse, even when it remains the project of a small but active minority.³⁶ The debates to date on the practical and conceptual developments in civil society in the Muslim world remain tentatively optimistic, but proponents of a progressive 'civil society' paradigm advance their argument with extreme prudence.³⁷ In the cases of Latin America and Eastern Europe, there had been a tendency to let one's own normative preferences and teleological inclinations brush aside some serious inconsistencies of the process of democratic consolidation.³⁸ For these particular democratic transitions, such conceptual lapses appear not to have had significant consequences because the voluntarist drive of the analyses, more often than not, reflected the views of the civil society groups and political counter-elites that were on the ascendancy in those polities at that time. In most of the Muslim world, however, similar assumptions about the liberal nature of civil society and of the political counter-elite cannot be taken for granted today.

In effect, even for those scholars who do not endorse Gellner's negative assessment of the prospect for civil society in the region, the common view appears to be that civil society cannot play the role of a dominant democratization paradigm in the Muslim context in the same way that it could be invoked in the 1980s and 1990s in Latin America and Eastern Europe.³⁹ Only in a few specific cases is this factor being invoked as one of the main explanatory tools for democratic transition, as in Robert Hefner's analysis of the Indonesian case.⁴⁰ From this perspective there are fewer opportunities for the authoritarian elites to hand over power 'gracefully' on the model of the Latin American 'pacted' transitions because of the ideological positions of the most powerful Islamist opposition movements in the MENA countries. The situation in Southeast Asia might have been the most propitious for such a process; but elsewhere in the Muslim world, only the better-run parliamentary monarchies, like Morocco or Jordan, appear to provide the kind of exit strategy for the ruling elite that might avoid a brutal democratic transition.

Yet, as the articles on Morocco by Cavatorta and by Wegner and Pellicer-Gallardo in this special issue illustrate, even in a reforming authoritarian system, the opportunities for full democratization are dependent upon the goodwill of the monarchy. Whatever incentives a powerful regional player like the EU can devise, the limits of its effectiveness are principally dictated by the willingness of the regime to allow a degree of political pluralism. In other cases, clearly, what

emboldens the determination of the ruling elite to stay in power is simply the perception that dramatic consequences would follow were they to relinquish power to the Islamist opposition, as the Algerian scenario illustrates. The contributions by Wolff and by Demmelhuber in this volume, regarding the situation in Egypt, exemplify quite well the inadequacy of EU incentives in the face of a regime that places survival and continuity at the core of its system of governance. Optimistically, one could view this situation as creating reserves of good democratic practices in civil and political society, waiting only for a weakening of authoritarian institutions in order to come out in the open and reshape domestic and regional politics.⁴¹ A less sanguine assessment would be that not only democratic skills are being built up and refined, but also authoritarian views and practices. Hence, were a specific authoritarian system to go bust, democratic alternatives would not be the only ones available on the ground for political entrepreneurs.⁴²

In many countries of the Muslim world, the limited liberal democratic civil society impulse contributes to creating an enduring situation of stalled transitions, which analysts then evaluate in connection to more structural, socio-economic, political and security factors. As Thomas Carothers points out,

what is often thought of as an uneasy, precarious middle ground between full-fledged democracy and outright dictatorship is actually the most common political condition today of countries in the developing world and the post-communist world. It is not an exceptional category to be defined only in terms of its not being one thing or the other; it is a state of normality for many societies, for better or worse.⁴³

From a functional/instrumental perspective, these pseudo-democratic systems actively produce a political order that tries to look like a liberal democracy in order to make domestic and international gains, without actually trying to become one.⁴⁴ This predicament is one of the main features of the democratization conundrums of the Muslim world, where the nature of political opposition generates an additional strain on the processes of democratic transition.

In the MENA region, three sets of structural issues appear to be particularly problematic. Because of the apparent weakness of civil society, scholars have been keen to stress the particular organization of state power in the (greater) Middle East. Analysts including Marsha Posusney and Eva Bellin emphasize the role played by the authoritarian elite, arguing that the strength of the coercive apparatus in the Arab world is the principal inhibitor of democracy change.⁴⁵ This line of argumentation is also invoked in conjunction with references to the notion of *asabiyya* (either regarding reconstructed tribes or clans, or regarding new military and technocratic cliques) as a key *explanan* in the politics of the (greater) Middle East.⁴⁶ Some commentators, like Akbar Ahmed, have even suggested that a notion of 'hyper-*asabiyya*' could also be used in order to understand the new security dynamics post-9/11.⁴⁷ On the more political (as opposed to securitarian) side of the argument, analysts including Volker Perthes and Ellen Lust-Okar

stress how elites have managed to co-opt their opponents, as well as to exploit and manipulate the splits between opposition groups (especially the secular-Islamist divide), so that they can neutralize demands for democracy from the masses.⁴⁸ This trend is reinforced by the fact that, historically, the MENA countries are generally latecomers to the democratization process. Everywhere, autocrats learn from past mistakes, and the rise of more competitive forms of authoritarianism in relation to liberal democracy is a noticeable trend at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Unsurprisingly, efforts to liberalize and democratize the political system of Muslim countries in recent years have often been equivalent to the refinement of the euphemized, authoritarian skills of the ruling elite.⁴⁹ Finally, as Raymond Hinnebusch indicates, explanations focusing on structural state power find additional support for their case by incorporating a political economy perspective that shows how oil wealth in the contemporary international context reduces the necessity to liberalize politically.⁵⁰

Rethinking democracy and its promotion

The problem that Islamic movements and parties create for common explanations of democratization on the southern shores of the Mediterranean is that their mobilizing potential challenges some basic assumptions about the relationship between contemporary forms of liberalism and democracy. For quite some time, analysts on the ‘clash’ side of the debate have maintained that all the discrete cases of opposition between Islamist views and ‘western’ liberal or democratic views are only the surface manifestations of a deeper and all-inclusive, illiberal and undemocratic worldview. This is a view that has been well conveyed to policy circles, despite its obvious problems of over-generalization. Opponents of the ‘clash’ primarily point out that there exists a more benign alternative, and emphasize the impact of the more ‘democratic’ and ‘liberal’ forms of political Islam.⁵¹ Yet, what is commonly missing from these analyses are detailed considerations of what conceptual compromises are needed for a meaningful dialogue between opposition and government (both domestically and internationally). This void may help to explain, to some degree, the current lack of options for (liberal) democracy promotion at the policy level. The lack of a cogent conceptual framework for assessing the role of Islamists in the Mediterranean, and for engaging adequately with them, is stressed by most of the contributors to this special issue as one of the key flaws of the EU approach(es) to the region.

Because of this impoverished conceptual perspective, it is usually the case that any deviation from the liberal democratic model in the Muslim context is perceived to favour the emergence of what Fareed Zakaria calls ‘illiberal democracies’.⁵² An alternative to the illiberal democracy scenario is to talk about ‘grey areas’ of democracy, thereby suggesting the partial convergence of Islamist and liberal-democratic political agendas. This is a policy approach that is well developed in connection to US democracy promotion, with scholars including Nathan Brown, Amr Hamzawy and Marina Ottaway providing sophisticated analyses of

these processes. For them, a key difficulty in the region is that the ethos of political and civil society needs to be reformed alongside the institutional setting.⁵³ Yet, their notion of convergence is generally viewed as a prelude to the full acceptance of existing liberal democratic models of governance, without much discussion of the flaws of these models. This is the kind of incrementalist scenario that is also most favoured by the EU when it comes to democracy promotion on the southern shores of the Mediterranean.

What remains understated in these analyses of the 'grey zone' is that the clarity which has been achieved in established liberal democracies is not merely a process of Rawlsian or Habermasian enlightenment, where legally backed, discursive processes ensure that an acceptable consensus on individual rights and collective duties is reached. It is also a more pragmatic assessment of the ability of political entrepreneurs to deliver material and ideological goods in an attractive and sustainable fashion. The choices of Palestinian voters regarding Fatah and Hamas in the 2006 parliamentary elections provided a clear illustration of that point. For all their merits, the above-mentioned analyses of democratization do not reflect upon the alternative political realities that Islamist movements are constructing, both ideologically and socially, and how far these models constitute locally viable and acceptable versions of 'democracy'.⁵⁴ Clearly, the construction of an alternative pro-democratic project is not a straightforward process. Charles Hirschkind's study of discursive interactions between Islamists and non-Islamists in Egypt illustrates the coercive undertone of apparently communicative dialogues.⁵⁵ In addition, as I indicated elsewhere, it may also be the case that, while Islamist players may welcome political liberalization as leading one step closer to their preferred model of democracy, once they reach the tipping point beyond which 'their' democracy is no longer compatible with the liberal-democratic standard currently promoted by the international community, then they may themselves settle for pseudo-democratic governance.⁵⁶ Yet, even when Islamists propose discourses and practices which are not opposed to liberal-democratic perspectives, the international community may still fail to recognize such an opportunity, as the EU's lack of involvement with key Islamic movements in the Mediterranean region illustrates today.⁵⁷

Conclusion

As the postcolonial literature emphasizes, it is conceptually hazardous to equate democratization with secularization and westernization. Talal Asad stresses that modernity is a set of interlinked projects for the institutionalization of principles such as constitutionalism, moral autonomy, democracy, human rights, civil equality, industry, consumerism, a free market, and secularism.⁵⁸ This idea of modernity encapsulates what western policy-makers and public opinion usually understand by a modern democracy. In practice, democratization may entail curtailing some of the prerogatives of the demos for the benefit of a liberal constitutional ideal. The kind of democratic order that had become the norm at the end of the twentieth

century proposes a democracy that is designed to place restraints on majority rule, with the view to protect very specific individual rights and civil liberties.⁵⁹ In most parts of the Muslim world, though, the process of democratic reinvention and institutionalization of 'a-liberal' Islamic practices is harnessed to the diffusion of a specific ethos that portrays them as virtuous components of a political project.

Islamist approaches blur the distinction between the public and the private, which is central to the functioning of contemporary liberal democratic institutions and introduce a more positive definition of liberty, which is couched in terms of religious law.⁶⁰ This observation does not imply that one should view a 'state versus church' power struggle as the sole, or even the main, bone of contention in Muslim politics when it comes to democratization in the region. As Alfred Stepan noted, 'the "lesson" from Western Europe, therefore, lies not in the need for a "wall of separation" between church and state, but in the constant political construction and reconstruction of the "twin tolerations"'.⁶¹ The ongoing reconfiguration of the secular-religious divide is bound to involve periods of crisis and confrontations. In this context, the bottom-up Islamic democratic construction of these ideological and institutional arrangements poses problems for traditional interpretations of democratization and democracy promotion, which are built on western, liberal perspectives.

To understand the new trends in democratization studies in the MENA region, there is a need to look beyond the functionalist explanations that currently dominate the field. The collapse of much of modernization theory, particularly in relation to secularization, which underpinned linear accounts of democratic transitions over the last two decades, has left a vacuum in the contemporary explanatory frameworks of democratization (or its lack thereof) in the Muslim world in general, and the MENA region in particular. Overall, the weakness of 'civil society'-based explanations opened the way for analyses based on structural factors, such as the role of security apparatuses and oil revenues, which form the backbone of accounts of the slow pace of political change in the region. Internationally, democratization processes continue to be viewed mainly as a dependent variable in a 'realist' geostrategic balance of power, with oil being a key *explanan*. Domestically, these processes are viewed mainly as a functional adaptation of Islamist movements to state repression and as their tactical adoption of a democratic discursive repertoire. Both sets of narratives are predicated upon a fairly static political order and fail fully to consider the process of democratization as an engine of change in domestic and international processes; hence the limited (and shrinking) interest in democracy promotion. As the historical trends in scholarship indicate, this situation is partly caused by the polarization of the debates about the direction of political change in the region. The contributors to this volume illustrate that there are many more aspects of democratization in the Mediterranean that need to be taken into consideration in order to have a more meaningful understanding of the contemporary political transformation – one that can truly inform policy-making.

Notes

1. Mitchell, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers*.
2. See for example Salamé, *Democracy without Democrats?*; Ayubi, *Political Islam*; Zubaida, *Islam, the People and the State*; Arjomand, *From Nationalism to Revolutionary Islam*.
3. See Diamond and Plattner, *The Global Resurgence of Democracy*; Esposito and Voll, *Islam and Democracy*.
4. Fish, 'Islam and Authoritarianism'; Tessler, 'Islam and Democracy in the Middle East'.
5. Eickelman and Piscatori, *Muslim Politics*.
6. For an interesting postcolonial perspective on this theme, see Sayyid, *A Fundamental Fear*.
7. Halpern, *The Politics of Social Change in the Middle East and North Africa*.
8. Halpern, 'Middle Eastern Studies', 111.
9. See Binder, *The Ideological Revolution in the Middle East*; Rustow, 'Turkey: The Modernity of Tradition'.
10. Kedourie, *Democracy and Arab Political Culture*; Lewis, *The Political Language of Islam*.
11. Bill and Leiden, *Politics in the Middle East*, 133.
12. Ibid.
13. Hudson, *Arab Politics*.
14. In the modern context *asabiyya* is a solidarity group founded on personal allegiances that derives directly or indirectly from clan-based or tribal solidarity networks and that displays a distinct 'group-spirit' or *esprit-de-corps*. See Khoury and Kostiner, *Tribes and State Formation in the Middle East*; Roy, 'Patronage and Solidarity Groups: Survival or Reformation'.
15. Lerner, *The Passing of Traditional Society in the Middle East*.
16. Abu-Lughod, 'Retreat from the Secular Path?'
17. For an early (and not altogether committed) illustration of this trend see Binder, *Islamic Liberalism*.
18. This is despite many attempts to introduce more fully regional specialisms in the larger social science debates. See for example, Tessler, Nachtwey, and Banda, *Area Studies and Social Science*.
19. Huntington, 'Will More Countries Become Democratic?'; Huntington, *The Third Wave*.
20. In his 1984 article, the only Islamic studies specialist that Huntington refers to in order to back his argument that Islamic political culture is an obstacle to democratic principles is the orientalist and political activist Daniel Pipes.
21. For a trenchant critique see Sadowski, 'The New Orientalism and the Democracy Debate'.
22. See Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*.
23. Compare Huntington, 'The Clash of Civilizations?' with Huntington, *The Third Wave*.
24. Karatnycky, 'The 2001 Freedom House Survey'.
25. This is not to say that notions of 'political culture' cannot be deployed usefully in the region – particularly to provide accounts of political change that avoid various forms of socio-economic determinism. See Hudson, 'The Political Culture Approach to Arab Democratization'.
26. See Perthes, 'America's "Greater Middle East" and Europe', and compare Bilgin, 'Whose "Middle East"?'
27. See Adler et al., *The Convergence of Civilizations*; Pace, *The Politics of Regional Identity*.

28. See Emerson and Youngs, *Political Islam and European Foreign Policy*.
29. Halliday, 'The Politics of Islam'.
30. O'Donnell and Schmitter, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule*.
31. Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam*; Kepel, *The Revenge of God*. Both Kepel and Roy would later add a corrective to their earlier narratives on the development of Islamism.
32. Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey*; Lewis, *The Political Language of Islam*.
33. On Turkey see, Yavuz, *Islamic Political Identity in Turkey*. More generally see Terence Ball, James Farr, and Russell L. Hanson, *Political Innovation and Conceptual Change*.
34. See for example the online outputs of the Pew Global Attitudes Project, <http://pewglobal.org> and World Values Survey, <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org>. See also Tessler, 'Islam and Democracy in the Middle East'; Fattah, *Democratic Values in the Muslim World*.
35. Gellner, *Conditions of Liberty*.
36. Norton, *Civil Society in the Middle East*.
37. See Hawthorne, 'Middle Eastern Democracy'; Eickelman and Salvatore, 'The Public Sphere and Muslim Identities'.
38. O'Donnell, *Counterpoints*.
39. Yom, 'Civil Society and Democratization'.
40. Hefner, *Civil Islam*.
41. See Adler et al., *The Convergence of Civilizations*.
42. See Volpi, 'Pseudo-Democracy in the Muslim World'.
43. Carothers, *Critical Mission*, 164.
44. Diamond, 'Thinking about Hybrid Regimes', 24.
45. Posusney, 'Enduring Authoritarianism'; Bellin, 'The Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East'.
46. See Roy, 'Patronage and Solidarity Groups'; Collins, 'The Political Role of Clans in Central Asia'.
47. Ahmed, *Islam under Siege*.
48. Perthes, *Arab Elites*; Lust-Okar, *Structuring Conflict in the Arab World*.
49. Brumberg, 'The Trap of Liberalized Autocracy'; Volpi, 'Algeria's Pseudo-Democratic Politics'.
50. Hinnebusch, 'Authoritarian Persistence, Democratization Theory and the Middle East'.
51. Salvatore and Eickelman, *Public Islam and the Common Good*; Esposito and Voll, *Islam and Democracy*.
52. Zakaria, *The Future of Freedom*.
53. See Brown, Hamzawy, and Ottaway, 'Islamist Movements and the Democratic Process in the Arab World'.
54. For some interesting recent works doing just that, see Yavuz, *Islamic Political Identity in Turkey*; Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*.
55. Hirschkind, 'Civic Virtue and Religious Reason'.
56. See Volpi, 'Pseudo-Democracy in the Muslim World'.
57. This situation evidently contributes to fostering of a mutual lack of recognition. See Emerson and Youngs, *Political Islam and European Foreign Policy*.
58. Asad, *Formations of the Secular*.
59. See Tully, *Strange Multiplicity*.
60. The case of Shi'a governance in Iraq might prove to be an interesting case in point. See Gleave, 'Conceptions of Authority in Iraqi Shi'ism'; Cole, 'The Ayatollahs and Democracy in Iraq'.
61. Stepan, 'Religion, Democracy and the "Twin Tolerations"', 42.

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