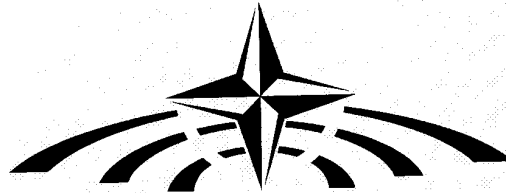


NATOs Parlamentariske Forsamling  
NPA alm. del - Bilag 162  
Offentligt

**MEDITERRANEAN  
SPECIAL GROUP**

080 GSM 06 E rev 1  
Original: English



**NATO Parliamentary Assembly**

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**THE YEAR OF ELECTIONS IN THE MIDDLE EAST**

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**DRAFT REPORT**

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International Secretariat

June 2006

\* Until this document has been approved by the Mediterranean Special Group, it represents only the views of the Rapporteur.

Assembly documents are available on its website, <http://www.nato-pa.int>

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## **I. INTRODUCTION**

1. 2005 was a year of elections throughout the Middle East: The Egyptian National Assembly approved a constitutional amendment following which the first competitive presidential elections were held in September 2005. Lebanon held its first free elections after the withdrawal of Syrian troops, brought about by mass protests. In Iraq, the first legislative elections were held in a relatively free and inclusive manner given the tense security situation. Most recently, the Palestinian elections in January 2006 were conducted in a free and fair way. According to The Carter Center and the National Democratic Institute (U.S.) mission report "the obvious pride and enthusiasm of Palestinians about the election process was evident throughout the voting districts."

2. Common to all these electoral processes is that they were carried out in the context of intense discussions on political and economic reforms, foreign influence and democracy promotion efforts. Moreover, they have increased the visibility of groups and parties with an explicitly Islamic outlook as successful participants in legislative elections. Whereas the Lebanese and Palestinian elections were considered free and fair, the Egyptian polls were tainted by several forms of electoral misconduct and high levels of violence. The Iraqi elections were acclaimed due to high voter turnout despite high levels of violence. However, this euphoria has since been reduced by increasing sectarian violence and the difficulties in forming a government.

3. The NATO Parliamentary Assembly's Special Mediterranean Group together with its Southern Mediterranean and Middle Eastern partners has continuously addressed questions of political reform and governance reform throughout the region. The 2005 report "*Building Bridges: The NATO PA and the Mediterranean*" called on parliamentarians to address the issue of political reform, "avoiding propagandistic initiatives that do not tackle the root causes of frustration and the real resentment among the population of many countries in the region" (NATO PA 2005). In its discussions and publications, the group has constantly reiterated the need for home grown approaches to democracy and the view that the form of government must be the object of collective choice of the people concerned. At the same time, political developments do not occur in a vacuum or in the absence of a complex network of interests. This reinforces the need for genuine debate and discussion of all relevant issues. The present report on elections and the role of Islamist parties is intended to contribute to this dialogue.

4. This report seeks to summarize the discussion surrounding political reform and the role of elections in political development. It will focus on country examples in order to highlight the importance of country-specific circumstances. One crosscutting issue is the emergence, re-emergence, or entrenchment of Islamist parties as successful participants in legislative elections. The report examines some of these movements in order to provide insights into the extent and ways in which parliamentarians can relate to their Islamist counterparts.

## **II. THE STATE OF POLITICAL LIBERALIZATION**

5. The discussion on political reform in the Arab world over the last twenty years has oscillated between optimism and pessimism regarding the pace of change and the degree of political openness. One of the key questions for analysts is how reform can be enacted through gradual opening while ensuring that the process is not stalled in cosmetic reforms. The theory of liberalised autocracy (Danial Brumberg) states that regimes' gradual political liberalisation do little more than cement their grip on the state, allowing just enough political freedom and pluralism to give dissenters the illusion of relative empowerment without really threatening regime stability. Others contend that gradual progress and commitment to reform by the incumbent elites is the most promising route to increased political accountability and more importantly, the development

of policies conducive to a better standard of living and improved security for people in the Middle East and North Africa.

6. According to Freedom House, during 2005, the Middle East saw a “modest but notable” increase in political rights and civil liberties. This represents the best score for the region since Freedom House first launched its Survey in 1972. That said, no Arab country has yet achieved the status of a “free society” according to the organisation’s methodology. The discussion about democracy is an ongoing one. It remains true that the pace of political opening remains very slow and uneven, leading many observers to the conclusion that a lack of political will and resolution are hampering genuine reform efforts. It is often difficult to judge whether important advances are neutralised by setbacks or whether the setbacks should be regarded simply as blips that do not pose a major threat to the onward momentum of the reform process. The recent discussion on the Egyptian emergency law provides an illustrative example. The 1981 law which is held responsible by activists for the erosion of civil liberties, places strong restrictions on associations and political parties. In September 2005, the government had suggested that the state of emergency could be lifted and replaced by a new national security legislation. The new, and also controversial, legislation had already been subject to intense political debate. In the meantime, however, the government has seized the opportunity to prolong the state of emergency for another two years. On April 30, 2006, and just one week after deadly bombings in Dahab, parliament voted on the prolongation of the state of emergency for another two years. The opposition strongly protested this decision that was brought about in a surprise move without prior parliamentary debate (Gamal Essam El-Din, 2006).

7. An examination of the demand side of the process provides us with a much clearer picture. In most countries, demands for stronger political accountability and, above all, integrity of political leaders are rising. Socio-economic conditions are deteriorating and provide an important push factor for reform. According to World Bank figures, one hundred million new jobs will be needed by 2020 to decrease unemployment and absorb new entrants into the labour market. This realization has led many countries to embark on a path of economic governance reform that entails both political and economic reforms in the areas of the rule of law, regulatory quality, government effectiveness, and the combat of corruption.

8. The position of the “West” vis-à-vis fostering Arab reform is widely condemned throughout the region as being hypocritical. Despite reformist rhetoric, these countries perceive Western states as interested in Arab reform only as long as their own interests are fulfilled. A recent Gallup poll of predominantly Muslim countries (Arab and non-Arab Muslim countries together representing 80% of the Muslim world) has found a large distrust of American intentions in the Middle East. At the same time, it emphasizes that these populations do not see the West as a monolith. Their opinion of the U.S. and the UK is generally unfavourable whereas those familiar with the EU regarded these countries in a more positive light (Mogahed 2006).

### **III. ELECTIONS AND DEMOCRACY: NOT A CLEAR-CUT RELATION IN THE REGION**

9. Elections are usually considered important tools on the path to increasing political participation and making governments more accountable to citizens. They have also become a favourite tool of the “democracy promotion industry”. Numerous theories exist that attempt to outline the impact of elections on the democratisation process. The reality certainly depends on country-specific contexts and traditions. It is nevertheless important to distinguish between two conventional wisdoms regarding the role of elections in democratic transition.

10. Sceptics see elections as an 'extremely valuable tool for undemocratic regimes in a democratic age' (El-Ghobashy 2006). The argument is that elections do not actually promote more flexible and accountable systems because they lack competitiveness and their outcome does not translate into practical political action. Elections therefore superficially legitimise a government that does not reflect the will of the people but has come to power or stays in power because of a lack of alternatives or through electoral engineering or fraud. This argument is intrinsically connected to the role and the scope of a parliament in specific countries. Even if elections are free, fair and truly competitive, they do not have a lasting impact on liberalisation because the resulting parliaments do not have sufficient room of manoeuvre. Some go even further, arguing that elections increase the longevity of authoritarian regimes because they convey legitimacy to incumbent regimes (Albrecht 2005, Lust-Okar 2006).

11. On the other hand, elections are regarded as having an important function in transition for a number of reasons. They aggregate political forces into parties and thus formalize existing informal networks. Elections offer political parties and civic groups an opportunity to mobilize and organize supporters and share alternative platforms with the public. They allow for the intergroup bargaining and the formation of alliances that are vital for the effective functioning of political systems. Most importantly, they allow new actors to enter the political game. Outcomes may have little direct political significance but the electoral process and resulting political landscape are often deeply significant.

12. One reason for the lack of genuine competition in elections in the Middle East is the absence of political parties and movements with broad based constituencies. Suffering from political restrictions, parties have also passed through different historical trajectories and traditions. Having played a very active role in the immediate post-independence era, Arab parliaments underwent marginalisation in the 1950s and 1960s (Baaklini/Denooux/Springborg 1999). Parliamentary systems were replaced by one party systems as in Egypt, Syria, and Iraq, but there was also a broader backlash against the role of parliaments. They were seen as ill suited to address the challenges of economic development since they represented the interests of traditional elites who opposed widespread reforms and often had strong links to colonial Western powers. There was also a strong distrust of people voting according to traditional loyalties under manipulation of the landed and commercial elites instead of casting their ballots independently and for progressive movements. Across the Arab world, there was a strong belief in the modernizing capabilities of "modernizing leaders" and the need for centralized and efficient decision making. Parliaments only re-emerged as significant arenas of political life in the late 1980s.

13. One of the oldest party systems in the region, the Egyptian system provides a powerful example of the disarray affecting the current political scene. Both the ruling party and the opposition lost a considerable number of seats in the 2005 legislative elections to the Muslim Brotherhood, which for the first time openly campaigned though still running its candidates as independents. The National Democratic Party of President Mubarak won 311 (73%) of the 444 seats in the Egyptian parliament and thus lost 64 seats since the last elections in 2000. The secular opposition parties won no more than 14 seats combined and there are 24 secular independent MPs. 88 seats went to candidates affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood. People's dissatisfaction becomes clear in the results. Notwithstanding the difficulties of the organised opposition parties, the Egyptian results do also include the highest overall number of opposition members in the past decades. The impression of discontent with the current political situation is exacerbated by a very low participation rate of just 28.5%.

14. Egyptian opposition parties are highly fragmented and currently undergoing significant changes with uncertain prospects of consolidation. The four main legal opposition parties are the liberal Al Wafd Party (6 seats), the leftist National Progressive Unionist Party (2 seats), the Arab Nasserist Party (no seat), and the Al Ghad Party (1 seat). In the aftermath of the legislative elections, tensions within opposition parties came even closer to the fore. The struggle within the

Wafd Party preoccupied the Egyptian political scene from the beginning of 2006, when frictions between the then leader Naaman Gomaa and the so-called reformist wing of the party escalated. Gomaa was accused of assuming an ever-tighter grip over his party and coalescing with allegedly reformist wings of the ruling NPD. He was ousted as president of the party after he prevented the publication of the party's newspaper in January 2006. He was subsequently arrested by the police when he, together with supporters, stormed the party's Cairo headquarters in April 2006. After fierce debate, Gomaa's strong opponent Munir Fakhry Abdel Nour, a Coptic Christian, was elected as new secretary general in June 2006. The Al Ghad party was similarly decapitated as a result of the arrest of its prominent head Ayman Nour on somewhat dubious forgery charges. He was sentenced to five years in prison and an appeal court refused his plea in May 2006. Nour came second after President Mubarak in the presidential elections and there are strong indications of a deliberate weakening of Al Ghad by the regime.

15. The quality of the 2005 legislative elections has seriously disappointed observers and monitors. The 2000 elections, with improved monitoring, came to be seen as the fairest in the country's history, the 2005 polls in depressing contrast saw a return of large-scale violence, vote rigging and arrests of candidates. Once it was clear that independent Islamist candidates had been very successful in the first two rounds of the election, security forces were accused of preventing pro-Islamist voters from casting their ballots and provoking widespread violence.

16. The relatively poor quality of elections has also provoked a strong debate within the country's Judges' Club, which is the professional association of bench judges and one of the key drivers in the struggle for competitive and fair elections. Some observers see the reformist judges as the most promising forces to stand up against the government. Known for its integrity and professional ethics, the Judges' Club along with civil society organisations was successful in reaching a court ruling based on the reinterpretation of a 1956 law that stretched obligatory judicial supervision to all (main and auxiliary) polling stations. However, this ruling only set the stage for an ongoing struggle between the judiciary and the executive over the control of elections. This struggle is emblematic in the question of what constitutes the 'judicial body' – merely sitting judges, or, as the government insists, also legal officers in the administrative prosecution and state attorneys. In July 2005, the Judge's Club for the first time issued a report on the conduct of the referendum on multi-candidate elections. The report challenged the government's turnout figures and claims of full judicial supervision, and was followed by another report examining the presidential elections. During the legislative elections, the Judges' Club documented numerous assaults on its members at polling stations and threats levelled towards reformist judges over the phone. Two leading judges who exposed fraud in the parliamentary elections (Hesham Bastawisi and Mahmoud Mekki) currently face dismissal and the court hearings sparked off demonstrations and subsequent arrests of activists. Hundreds of demonstrators and political dissenters were arrested during protests in May 2006. Seen against this background, elections in Egypt have indeed become "a fulcrum of both rhetorical and material contention over the basics of regime legitimacy and control" (El-Ghobashy 2006).

17. Observers' disappointment with the speed of progress of reforms in Egypt and the weak results of non-Muslim Brotherhood opposition candidates must also be considered in the context of the disappointing reality of the constitutional amendment of May 2005 that introduced multi-candidate presidential elections. This was initially celebrated as a significant step towards genuine reforms. In the end, however, the amendment was voted with a set of conditions attached to it that proved sobering for those with high hopes. Although multiple candidates will be allowed to run theoretically, the conditions attached for the nominations of candidates will yet throw up significant obstacles in the near future. The present text requires that nominations be supported by at least 250 members of representative bodies (65 members of the People's Assembly, 25 members of the Shura Council, and ten members of local councils in fourteen Governorates). Furthermore, the amendment requires parties to surmount significant barriers before they are able to nominate candidates; indeed these barriers are even more severe for independents. Parties have to be

active, at least five years old, and hold at least five percent of the seats in the People's Assembly and the Shura Council respectively. These conditions were waived for the 2005 elections but under these rules, the present composition of parliament would not allow any of the opposition parties to nominate a presidential candidate. There is, therefore, considerable pressure on opposition parties to do better in the 2010 elections so that they are able to file candidates in 2011. This reality might prove a driver for consolidation across the opposition spectrum.

18. A real reason for optimism were the Lebanese elections in 2005 following the withdrawal of the Syrian troops. Following the murder of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in February 2005, mass protests inspired by the Georgian Rose Revolution and the Ukrainian Orange Revolution created the momentum that eventually led to the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon. On 26 April 2005, the last uniformed Syrian soldier left Lebanon and parliamentary elections were held in May. The unicameral 128 seats National Assembly was voted via one of the freest and best monitored electoral processes in Lebanon's history. The Rafik Hariri Martyr List, a coalition of Saad Hariri's Current for the Future, the Progressive Socialist Party and other anti-Syrian parties won a total of 72 seats. Pro-Syrian forces, mainly Hizbollah and the Amal Movement won a total of 35 seats. The emerging Free Patriotic Movement under General Aoun won 14 seats. General Aoun returned from exile after the Syrian withdrawal and runs on the platform of combating clientelism and sectarianism. Most importantly, the popular success in forcing Syria to withdraw and the subsequent elections have created a strong momentum among politicians and civil society to overcome sectarian divisions and tackle the issues that prevent national reconciliation.

19. Since March 2, fourteen political leaders from Shi'a, Christian, Druze, and Sunni parties have been holding a National Dialogue to address divisive issues such as the disarmament of both Hizbollah and Palestinian militants in accordance with Resolution 1559 passed by the UN Security Council in 2004 and the future of the pro-Syrian president Emile Lahoud. The dialogue has yet produced little result so far. Parties could not agree on substituting president Lahoud which takes away leverage and manoeuvring space for agreement on Hizbollah's disarmament, which is on the table for June 2006. An independent commission has been set up to draft a new electoral law that is urgently needed to replace the old one which is based on sectarian foundations.

#### ***IV. THE MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD AND ITS AFFILIATES IN ELECTORAL POLITICS***

20. As already stated, a tool of so-called democracy promotion has been the support of parliamentary elections. The conduct of free and fair elections has become a paradigm for judging a government's commitment to reform. At the same time, Western governments have been wary of Islamist parties especially since the U.S.' traumatic experience with the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979 and the increasingly vociferous anti-Western and more specifically anti-American attitudes of Islamist political movements [International Crisis Group (ICG), March 2005]. The two paradigms of pleading for free and fair elections on the one hand and avoiding a strong Islamist presence on the other, are becoming increasingly impossible to reconcile. Those who pro-actively advocate reform in the Middle East have thus been caught in a "democracy dilemma" where their objectives are met with unintended consequences.

21. In many countries around the Mediterranean and in the Arab world, parties with an Islamist outlook have seen electoral successes in parliamentary elections. In Lebanon, 12 out of 128 deputies come from an Islamist background (Hizbollah). In Egypt, 88 of the 444 members of parliament can be linked to the Muslim Brotherhood, which is not legally recognised as a party. Members with an Islamist orientation thus constitute the biggest opposition block in the Egyptian Parliament. In Jordan, the Islamic Action Front (IAF), considered the political wing of the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood, has a long history of participation in parliamentary elections and is currently represented in parliament with 17 out of 110 members. This number is still relatively small since the Jordanian electoral law has been redesigned in a way that disadvantages the IAF. In Kuwait,

there is an increasingly conservative tendency in parliament and Islamists hold 16 of the 50 seats. Iraq is a somewhat special case due to its post-conflict situation and a previously almost non-existent party system. Islamist forces from both denominations have been successful in winning most of the seats in the Transitional National Assembly.

22. In the wake of September 11, the general public began to take notice of the phenomenon of "political Islam". Many, however, ignored its long history and evolution. Analysis - influenced by the recent events - has often blurred distinctions between movements and philosophies and it is only now that a more nuanced picture of Islamist movements is beginning to be accepted. It is generally acknowledged that there is a wide mainstream of Islamist movements that have officially renounced or refrained from the use of violence for a sustained period of time. These must be distinguished from those organisations willing to use violence indiscriminately in order to attain their goals. The former can be found in parties and movements in the tradition of the modern Muslim Brotherhood or similar Islamic parties. The latter comprise Salafist movements like Al Qaeda, the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, or other radical fundamentalist movements.

23. Whereas there is a consensus across the political and geographical spectrum about the need to combat radical fundamentalists, there exists no consensus about the perception of moderate Islamist movements and organisations, which are still viewed with suspicion and a lack of comprehension. The essence of Islamism can be described as "the active assertion and promotion of beliefs, prescriptions, laws, or policies that are held to be Islamic in character." (ICG, March 2005). Examining Islamist groups and parties, a recent ICG report finds that "the *most thoroughly political* currents in Islamic activism have proved able and inclined to adopt or at least accommodate modernist and democratic ideas" (ICG March 2005, emphasis included in original). Basing their program on Islamic values and to some extent an Islamic vision of the state, the Islamist programme moreover addresses a wider array of popular concerns ranging from religion to good governance and national identity. At the NATO PA's Mediterranean Dialogue seminar in Istanbul, British analyst and keynote speaker Alastair Crooke explained to members of the Mediterranean Special Group how Islamists formulated a claim to recognition of a Muslim identity. It was significant that the terminology used by Islamists was one of ethics, politics and dignity whereas Western policy circles were seeking strategies in a language of force, power, and military. In Crooke's assessment, it must be acknowledged that Islamism is to a large part an expression of identity. This is a key in the explanation of Islamist successes and it also makes away with the belief that a strategy of isolation of movements would absolve the West from dealing with this political tendency. Rami Khouri similarly states that "Huge numbers of ordinary Arabs and Asians feel they have long been denied their cultural identity, political rights, national sovereignty, personal freedoms and basic human dignity. Islamist groups have responded with a powerful package that speaks to their citizenry about religion, national identity, legitimate good governance, and resistance to foreign occupation and subjugation" (Khouri 2006).

24. The most prominent Islamist organisation is the Muslim Brotherhood, which may have affiliates in as many as 70 countries. Some are large and legal political parties such as Jordan's Islamic Action Front, Yemen's Islah Party and Morocco's Justice and Development Party. Others are semi-legal, such as the original Egyptian Brotherhood, which is not legalized as a party but could more or less openly campaign in the recent parliamentary elections. In Syria, mere membership remains a capital crime and the organisation operates out of London, as does the Libyan version. In addition to these more formal networks other groups such as Iraq's Muslim Scholars' Board and many mosque based charities are more loosely linked to the Brotherhood, often only by means of personal affiliations.

25. The organisation was born in Egypt, where to this day, it is well rooted in the social and cultural fabric of society due to its long tradition and closeness to people's immediate concerns. It was founded in 1928 as a primarily social and charitable organisation. After a long period of soul-searching with respect to the movement's political role, continued repression by the state, and



increasing radicalisation on its fringes, the movement has, since the 1980s, begun to position itself as an opposition party within the Egyptian political and constitutional system. In the parliamentary elections of 1984 and 1987, the Muslim Brothers were able to score a substantial number of votes by forming alliances with the New Wafd Party (1984) and the Social Labour and the Liberal Social Parties (1987). To this day there are no indications that the Muslim Brotherhood will be recognized as a party and thus be able to participate independently in elections. As in previous elections, during 2005, the movement's candidates and voters were subject to intense intimidation by regime forces.

26. Unlike many political parties, the Muslim Brotherhood's parties are often well organised. Each parallel organisation has a broadly similar three-tiered structure. In Jordan, for example, members are represented by their own General Associations, which are elected every two years and vary in number and size according to region. This body, in turn, elects five-member Administrative Associations and also the 50-member council (*majlis al-Shura*) once every four years. It is then the duty of the Council to elect a secretary general, a deputy secretary general, and a seven member executive committee. The three-tiered structure remains a durable model but is subject to country specific variations. In Egypt, for example, the levels are comprised slightly differently in terms of numbers and mandate, with a significantly larger 'top office'.

27. The Muslim Brotherhood has only one 'guide'. This is a position held by the head of the Egyptian Brotherhood in recognition of the origins and history of the organisation, which was founded by Hassan al-Banna in 1928. The organisational reach of the current Supreme Leader, 83-year-old Mahdi Akef is actually relatively weak and his role is essentially ceremonial. This is largely because the 'International Organisation' itself only meets at irregular intervals and restricts itself to giving advice or acting as an arbiter. Even its publications, the weekly *al-Risalat al-Ikhwan* (Letters of the Brothers) and monthly *al-Da'wa* (The Calling), both published in London have limited impact. The former Brotherhood 'spokesman for the West', Egyptian Kamal al-Helbawi has openly lamented the lack of international organisation arguing that the Brotherhood should work openly and meet with public figures and furthermore that there should be a dedicated research centre and TV Channel in order to create a 'global forum for dialogue'. Despite this, continuous government repression in many countries has resulted in almost obsessive secrecy and this has impacted on the movement as a whole.

28. Despite their links and ties to the central organisation, the various branches are increasingly determined by particular contextual circumstances and national agendas. During the 1990-91 Gulf Crisis, for example, the Jordanian Brothers had no option but to support Iraq, whereas their Egyptian counterparts were free to criticise Saddam Hussein and did not even oppose U.S. intervention. The Islamic Resistance Movement, Hamas, in the Palestinian Territories is mainly concerned with what they consider a struggle for national liberation and so is the Lebanese Hizbollah. There is, therefore, little evidence to suggest that the Brothers have a co-ordinated plan to spread their influence, let alone control the Muslim world (The Economist 2006).

## **V. ISLAMIST POLITICAL PROGRAMMES**

29. Islamist parties often assert their commitment to democracy and to human rights and they have done so especially vocally in countries where they could not form legal political parties like Egypt, Tunisia, or Syria. Many of them have come a long way from their original positions and have long been falsely lumped together with radical movements. In a recent study of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, the authors have also identified crucial areas where Islamists' thinking remains ambiguous (Brown/Hamzawy/Ottaway 2006).

30. With respect to Islamic law, all movements call for the "application of the Islamic Sharia". This in itself does not shed light on the clear programme of the parties. In fact, the Gallup poll

quoted above found that a mean of 79% of people surveyed in the Muslim world support the idea that Sharia should be a source of law. In only three countries, respondents favoured Sharia as the only source of law but in most cases, respondents wanted Sharia as "a source of law but not the only source of legislation" (Gallup World Poll initiative 2006). Furthermore, a clear majority at the same time wants freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and freedom of assembly. Most Arab constitutions today attribute an official role to the Sharia but the practical consequences of this differ largely. In reality, the areas where Islamists push for an Islamic revision of present laws differ strongly across countries. Moreover, those areas that stir considerable unease in the Western media, like the Islamic penal code, are not part of the demands of mainstream Islamists in most countries. The crucial point of contestation between Islamists and non-Islamists in their differing conceptions of democracy is the source of sovereignty. Are laws derived from the authority of God or from the people who elect legislators to formulate laws that govern the community? There are first signs from Islamists in Morocco and Egypt that movements do not insist that *all* laws must draw from Islamic sources but that they should where such sources are available, or that Islamic authorities should be consulted in the process of lawmaking (Brown/Hamzawy/Ottaway 2006).

31. Further ambiguities persist in the areas of political rights and especially women's and minority rights. Liberals are deeply suspicious of Islamist commitments to civil and political liberties of the individual. On a philosophical level, Islamists emphasize the interests of the community over the interest of individuals. Even if there is considerable flexibility over the definition of the community's interests, liberals fear that in contentious cases Islamists are ready to considerably restrict individual liberties for the sake of the collective. When it comes to women's rights, there are considerable differences between the Arab peninsula and the rest of the Arab world. Whereas women's rights remain more severely restricted in the Gulf, Islamists in the rest of the Arab world generally accept women's participation in political life. Women are running as Islamist candidates and they are an important part of the Islamist electorate. The issue becomes more difficult in the application and interpretation of personal status laws (marriage, divorce, inheritance), where women's rights remain severely constrained. Islamist programmes remain deeply ambiguous on their ideas of advancing women's rights. There are, however, a few promising examples. In Morocco, the Islamist Justice and Development party became, after a period of long resistance, part of a commission that drafted the new liberal personal status law of 2004.

32. With respect to minority rights there remain considerable differences across countries, which also reflect the political and socio-economic realities of individual countries. The issues at stake are rising tensions between different branches of Islam and the position of Christian and Jewish minorities in predominantly Muslim countries. In Lebanon, there is currently a rapprochement between the Shi'a Hizbollah movement and the Christian/secular Free Patriotic (Tayyar) movement to bridge sectarian divides within the national dialogue. In Egypt, the differences in attitudes become evident when comparing the Muslim Brotherhood and the Wasat Party. Both recognise that Sharia law cannot be applied to Copts, the largest minority in Egypt. The Muslim Brotherhood as a purely religious organisation excludes Copts from membership in the organisation. The Wasat party, however, as a political organisation with a moderate Islamist outlook, accepts Copts as members and has already attracted a few Coptic intellectuals. Minority rights are one of the pressing questions throughout the region that can only be resolved through a rethinking of the concept of citizenship detached from religion. Brown, Hamzawy, and Ottaway thus conclude that "the issue of religious minorities will only be resolved if Islamist movements accept the principle of universal citizenship without discrimination on the basis of creed or any other attribute. So long as Islamist movements retain their dual political-religious identity, acceptance of full equality of all groups is impossible."

## **VI. ENGAGING WITH ISLAMISTS?**

33. Regardless of how the open presence of Islamist parties came about, whether it was through increasingly pluralistic systems, through foreign interference, or through stronger support for explicitly Islamic parties in Muslim constituencies, their participation in political life today is a fact. This has generated a lively discussion about the means and extent of cooperation with Islamist representatives. On the one hand, having been elected in many countries through relatively free and fair elections, Islamists have a mandate to represent their constituencies. They are today the biggest opposition forces in many countries of the Middle East and North Africa. On the other hand, there remain serious contradictions and grey zones with respect to their goals as outlined above.

34. For some movements, embracing the regular political process and renouncing the use of violence as a means to pursue their goals have been a relatively recent development. Many analysts have shown how the strategy of widespread violent jihad in the 1980s failed to convince the masses about the Islamist project (Gilles Keppel, Olivier Roy). In both Algeria and Egypt, for example, violent groups have lost broad based appeal. Given their recent transformation and participation in elections, others now fear that Islamists have merely changed their strategy and not altered the essence of their goals. According to this logic, these groups will continue to pursue the establishment of a thoroughly Islamic state based on the model of the early caliphates and will work towards this goal once they are in a position to do so.

35. Those in favour of engaging with Islamists usually base their arguments on one of the two defined positions. Some remain deeply suspicious of the movements and others assume that movements will move closer to the mainstream and fully embrace civil liberties and tolerance. The more suspicious minded argue that Islamists run a high risk of failing in practical political life because their programmes do not encompass hard issues like economic and social reforms. Government participation could, therefore, prove a sobering experience and demonstrate to their electorate that the many promises of Islamists do not have solid and realistic foundations. Others argue that there can be a true dialogue with Islamists and that under the right circumstances, they will further transform and adapt their programme to contemporary challenges. A serious commitment to good governance and the will to transform societies within the framework of the modern nation state are, in this line of argument, signs that Islamists are serious and increasingly pragmatic political actors.

36. Another aspect of the discussion is the question of alternatives. Observers note that moderate Islamist movements are not only the most popular political force in several countries, but they are also struggling to shape their position in opposition to the "revolutionary" movements. The term "revolutionary" (Alastair Crooke) or "takfiris", describes those who are not ready to work within the given institutional system. Unlike the "revivalists" (Crooke) or moderates, they are ready to destroy the foundations of these systems in the Muslim world and in the West through terror and violence. Al Qaeda is a clear example of a "revolutionary" movement that has already openly threatened more moderate movements and sought to undermine them. A failure of the "revivalist" Islamist movements would boost the appeal of those revolutionaries since they will be the ones left to formulate the quest for identity and recognition. Refugee camps and economically less developed areas are breeding grounds for such extremism and it would be especially dangerous to concede them to "revolutionary" forces.

37. The above has shown that Islamists have moved considerably towards the mainstream but that ambiguities in the thinking of Islamists persist. In order to extrapolate future developments it is important to understand why these ambiguities persist and how past changes have been brought about. Taking into account specific country circumstances and traditions, there are two general factors that explain the pace of change. First, there is a considerable difference between movements that could develop both a political and religious structure and those which embody

both within one organisation. Political parties like the Moroccan Justice and Development Party or the Jordanian Islamic Action Front could evolve considerably towards more pragmatism leaving purely religious issues to the Moroccan Reform and Renewal Movement or the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood. Organisations that embody both functions like the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood are much less flexible since too much political pragmatism is likely to compromise their credibility as Islamic organisations. Indeed religious compromise is one of the major challenges facing Islamist movements and it helps to explain the considerable degree of ambiguity which is evident in their policies. Second, there exists a generational change within movements that impacts on their methods of operation. Historical reality in many countries has forced Islamist activists into exile where they developed strong and at times secretive positions. In comparison, the younger generation of activists have matured in a period of greater political freedom and are therefore more positively inclined to use the political process. Parties like the Egyptian Wasat party (not legalized) were formed by breakaway groups of younger activists after intra-movements tensions (Brown/Hamzawy/Ottaway).

38. One of the key questions relating to the engagement issue is the question of violence. The distinction between moderate Islamists, taking part in the political process, and radical fundamentalist groups using non-legitimate means like terrorism to reach their goals, becomes more blurred when judging movements like the Palestinian Hamas or the Lebanese Hizbullah. These groups take part in the political process *and* subscribe to violent methods to reach their goals. Particular to both groups is their self-portrayal as resistance movements, seeking to “liberate their people” rather than waging a war or so-called jihad against the Western or modernizing Arab world in general. In fact, most Islamist movements that have renounced violence in their domestic contexts, support violence in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian or Arab-Israeli conflict.

39. In order to assess the possibility of Hamas assuming a more moderate outlook, many look to Lebanon’s Hizbollah. Although from a different, Shi’a, religious and social tradition, Hizbollah is undergoing a similar process as a resistance movement entering the regular political system. Ten years after its creation, in 1992, Hizbollah fielded its first parliamentary candidates and won eight of the 27 Shi’a seats in the Lebanese National Assembly. Since then the number of Hizbollah’s seats has steadily increased, reaching fourteen at the last elections in 2005. A crucial turning point for the movement was the withdrawal of Syrian troops. The movement has consistently demonstrated its loyalty to Syria and was confronted with a difficult choice between its non-sectarian national Lebanese goals and its allegiance to Damascus. Fearing increased demands for its disarmament, Hizbollah staged a rather embarrassing rally after the March 2005 Security Council Resolution against Syria. Interestingly, though, ralliers carried Lebanese cedar tree flags rather than party banners, which has been interpreted as a sign of Hizbollah’s continued desire for meaningful political integration. The question of Hizbollah’s disarmament currently hinges on the prospect of integrating Hizbollah’s armed wing into the Lebanese armed forces. Hizbollah has stated that integration was possible but the current conditions and the failure of the national dialogue to produce a result on the disputed presidency make a concrete outcome unlikely. Hizbollah insists that disarmament is only thinkable in the framework of a on national self-defence against Israel and it rejects foreign pressure on the group to disarm.

40. The success of the Islamic Resistance Movement in the Palestinian Territories represents a first time in the Arab world that an Islamist party has achieved a parliamentary majority. It is also the first time that a government in the Middle East has been changed through democratic elections. Hamas has refused to rule out armed struggle, which it regards as a legitimate right of the Palestinian people. The movement consists of essentially a social services organisation and a military wings, the Izzedine al-Qassam Brigades. However, because of its underground character and unstable leadership due to exile and elimination by Israel, it is not clear exactly how separate the military and political wing are in practice and how streamlined its spokespeople are. Having failed to form a coalition government based on “national unity”, Hamas has proceeded to form a

cabinet out of its own ranks and technocrats. The new Palestinian government has been sworn in on March 29, 2006.

41. The international response to the Palestinian elections was one of cautious engagement. On January 30, the Quartet (the U.S., EU, Russia, and the UN) stated that its future cooperation with the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) required that "all members of a future Palestinian government must be committed to non-violence, recognition of Israel, and acceptance of previous agreements and obligations, including the Roadmap." In his State of the Union address on January 30, U.S. President Bush called upon Hamas leaders to "recognize Israel, disarm, reject terrorism, and work for lasting peace." Hamas officials were received by few non-Arab countries including Russia and Turkey. Not surprisingly, Iran also received Hamas delegations. The Turkish position reiterated support for the Quartet's position but also called on the international community to be ready to work with a democratically elected government. On March 2, Russia received a Hamas delegation led by Khaled Meshaal. This was the first time a member of the Quartet has held formal talks with the new legislators. Since the inauguration of the Hamas government, the U.S. and the EU have taken a firm stance prohibiting contacts between its diplomats and any officials from Hamas led ministries. The Council of the EU takes, however, a neutral stance towards parliamentary contact and does not explicitly rule out contacts between member state parliamentarians and PLC members.

42. There are two schools of thought with respect to the prospects of Hamas developing into a mainstream, non-violent party: the moderation through inclusion thesis and the thesis that Hamas will remain hard-lined. Those who foresee moderation through participation state that realities have fundamentally changed since the drafting of Hamas' charter and that the charter does not actually correspond to the political practice of the movement. By entering the Palestinian Legislative Council which is a direct result of the Oslo peace process, Hamas implicitly acknowledges the Oslo process. Hamas has, on numerous occasions, stated the possibility of a long cease-fire (hudna, the equivalent to an international treaty in Islamic law, or tahdia, a more vague term to describe a period of calm) with Israel, which could represent a possible window of opportunity for negotiations. In an editorial in January 2006, Khaled Meshal stated that "... if you are willing to accept the principle of a long-term truce, we are prepared to negotiate the terms." Hamas has not carried out any attacks during the temporary truce since March 2005 and has eliminated the call for Israel's destruction from its electoral program. The first step to Hamas' inclusion in the political process was made with the movement's participation in the municipal elections between December 2004 and May 2005 when it gained a large proportion of votes. After that, Hamas municipal officers and the Israeli Defense Force Civil Administration cooperated more or less officially on day-to-day issues like civilian affairs or infrastructure, which analysts take as an additional hint that in reality Hamas has come to terms with Israel's existence.

43. Those who argue that Hamas is not seeking an agreement with Israel interpret the Hamas charter to mean that the whole of Palestine including today's Israel is considered an Islamic endowment (waqf). Therefore "no inch" can be or will be conceded. This is taken as evidence that Hamas is not ready to accept the existence of Israel on part of the territory the movement considers entirely as Palestine. In its quest for the "liberation of Palestine" the movement calls for jihad, which, among other things also means armed struggle to defend the holy land and is thus interpreted as call for the elimination of Israel. Another interpretation sees actual Hamas policy as trying to obstruct a two state solution until the demographic balance turns in favour of the Palestinians, which is expected to happen at the latest by 2020. This would take away the justification for the existence of a Jewish state of Israel.

44. The critical question of the possible recognition of Israel can at present not be answered by looking at the movement's official statements. Three positions have been expressed in the Arabic and English media: first, that Hamas will never recognize the State of Israel, second, that the movement will recognize the state of Israel if it withdraws from the "occupied Palestinian

Territories” and Eastern Jerusalem, and third, that Hamas is ready to negotiate a lengthy truce on the basis of the 1967 borders. The question is most critical to Hamas as it touches on the very *raison d'être* of the movement. A February survey conducted by the Future Research Center in Gaza found that 70% of Palestinians are against recognition of Israel in exchange for international support. Nevertheless, support for negotiations has not waned. A recent poll (quoted by Palestinian Chief Negotiator Saeb Erekat) showed that 84% of Palestinians still want a negotiated peace agreement with Israel and even among Hamas voters, more than 60% are in favour of an “immediate” resumption of negotiations. Observers interpret the strong support for negotiations on the one hand and the good results for Hamas on the other as a vote in favour of a revised negotiation strategy. In view of this, Hamas is seeking the end of the so-called “incrementalism” which was characteristic of the Oslo process where mutual concessions were supposed to incrementally lead to the agreement on the final status. Hamas, however, wants the recognition of the Palestinian right to the territories of 1967 as a starting point for negotiations. This would leave the Palestinians in a stronger negotiating position but would not preclude compromise based on the current situation. In line with these observations on Hamas’ general willingness to engage in a political process, Sharon Pardo from the Ben-Gurion University of the Negev (NATO PA 2006) also recommended that the international community “pay more attention to what Hamas does than to what it says”.

45. For the international community the question of cooperation with Hamas affiliated officials becomes especially relevant with regard to financial aid to the Palestinian Authority (PA). The humanitarian situation is worsening and Gaza has already witnessed food shortages. At the first cabinet meeting of the new government, Palestinian prime minister Haniya announced that the PA had run out of funds and was unable to pay salaries for civil servants. The Palestinian budget is composed of tax and customs revenues, currently withheld by the Israeli authorities; and external assistance. The U.S. transfers a total of \$400m yearly and the EU steps in with a total of \$600m. U.S. aid flows were frozen after the inauguration of the new government. The EU Commission has halted cooperation with the PA which puts at stake over half of the EU’s aid flows. The largest part of European aid to Palestinians (48%) goes to social, economic, and budgetary aid, the maintenance of emergency services, and the development of institutions. This part of European aid directly involves Palestinian authorities. The 20 percent of humanitarian aid is channelled through the ministry of social affairs and NGOs. The rest of EU aid goes to assistance to refugees or specific programs and thus reaches UN organisations (UNRWA) or NGOs.

46. A World Bank report of May 7 warns against undermining Palestinian institutions, as experience in fragile states has shown that “mainstream institutional breakdown is very hard to reverse: complex structures such as school systems are not machines to be switched on and off at will” (World Bank 2006). The humanitarian situation in the Palestinian Territories is beginning to worsen as hospitals run out of medical supplies and food and petrol shortages are manifest in Gaza. Approximately one million people out of a total of 3.5 million depend on payments from the PA, which was unable to pay salaries in March and April. The World Bank warns not only of institutional breakdown but also of a humanitarian crisis and rising insecurity as the discipline and patience of unpaid security personnel is difficult to ensure. The monthly US\$180 million budget is declining due to a freeze in external funding, banking restrictions that impede substitute transfers from Arab states, and Israeli restrictions on the movement of goods and labour. The Palestinian Monetary Authority has warned of a monetary crisis if Israeli banks continue to halt the supply of shekels because they allegedly fear sanctions for acting as corresponding banks with the Palestinian banking system. The World Bank estimates that “if today’s strictures remain or intensify, the PA may be looking at no more than US\$25 million in domestic revenues per month, and no banking system available with which to distribute them.” On June 23, the European Commission has announced that it will make a €105million contribution to the Temporary International Mechanism for the Palestinians. The largest shares of this contribution will serve to pay allowances to individuals (€40million) and utility bills (€40million). The Commission, however, emphasizes that these measures will not suffice to alleviate the humanitarian crisis if tax and

customs revenues continue to be withheld by the Israeli authorities and if banking restrictions remain in place.

47. Hamas' success as a governing party will also be vital for the Muslim Brotherhood organisation, its mother-organisation and other Islamist parties. This explains the strong efforts by the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood to maintain aid by calling on the Egyptian government to lobby Arab governments. In order to guarantee the success of the Hamas experiment, the Brotherhood is likely to provide "doctrinal cover and political support" (The Economist 2006) for Hamas' decisions. It is foreseeable that there will be considerable flexibility on doctrine. However, Hamas' decisions about the possibility and the pace of interaction with Israel should also be seen in the context of wider Muslim Brotherhood relations and their fear of compromising their credibility within their constituencies as described above.

## **VII. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE NATO PA**

48. Dialogue with Islamist parliamentarians is undeniably coming onto the agenda of international organisations, national parliamentarians, and interparliamentary organisations. On the one hand, Islamists increasingly participate in the regular political process, change some of their radical stances, and reach out to other groups. On the other hand, some of their positions remain serious obstacles to genuine cooperation. What is certain, is that there is a lack of understanding of their positions, their "grey zones", and the room for manoeuvre and conditions thereof. For this reason, an exchange of views is a first and important step although it must clearly be distinguished from support or endorsement.

49. One of the key problems of foreign policy towards the region has been the lack of consistency in dealing with issues and political and social movements. In the eyes of Arab citizens and political groups, Western dealings exhibit different standards for countries allied with the U.S. or Europe and where the West has strategic interests, like Pakistan or Saudi Arabia, or with others. The lack of credibility is today one of the most serious problems facing any kind of dialogue and partnership approach. In dealing with emerging actors, it is therefore all the more important to draw up clear standards that make policy coherent and to a minimum predictable.

50. However, the establishment of such standards is a challenging task. While representing the benchmarks for dialogue they must also leave room for the consideration of country specific circumstances. The discussions around relations with the Palestinian Legislative Council are emblematic of this. While the use of violence against civilians is unacceptable as a political means, the specific circumstances of the Palestinian Territories and the pressing need for a solution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict must be taken into account. While the international community's demands for a recognition of Israel and a renunciation to violence are fully justified, the historical context and the complexity of the conflict raise a number of questions as to their implementation. These are notably the issues of timing, semantics of declarations, and reciprocity.

51. Generally speaking, the above report has shown that Islamist parties reflect the expression of popular preferences and that they are very well capable of engaging in meaningful bargaining processes. Therefore, dialogue should also encompass groups that have been excluded until now under a set of conditions as described above. This is necessary for the mere comprehension of their goals and organizations. Only then can there be a differentiated political approach.

52. Islamist parties are an undeniable reality and reflect the expression of preferences by many Muslims. Their success is to a large extent due to socio-economic conditions and domestic political systems that lack openness. Movements can also capitalize on the existing conflicts in the region and the reassertion of Muslim identity in the face of Western policies that are perceived as unfair. One lesson for the future must be the guarantee of a level playing field for Islamist and non-Islamist parties. Until now, Islamists in many counties enjoyed a considerable advantage

through their access to social networks of mosques and religious organizations while the corresponding meeting and discussion arenas have been restricted for secular groups. This report does not proclaim the endorsement of Islamist parties but it does call for an effort to develop a genuine understanding of these groups and a recognition of their strong position in the Muslim world. Furthermore, this does not preclude efforts to support other opposition groups and support their efforts. Parliamentarians can call on their governments to take a clear stance in favour of freedom of speech and freedom of assembly for all political groups.

53. Parliaments are an integral part of any functioning accountable polity. But they can also play an important part (i) in fostering transition and, (ii) in ensuring stability throughout the transition process. While the centrality and power of parliaments within political systems may be the result of domestic bargaining and political development, NATO PA members can help increase the capacity of parliaments in the Arab region.

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