

POLICY BRIEF

**RECOMMENDATIONS
FOR THE NEW
ADMINISTRATION**

U.S. Engagement with Islamists

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The nexus between religion and politics in the Middle East is one of the most vital issues U.S. policymakers must understand. Islamists in the region, in particular, are major political actors. Yet U.S. foreign policy engagement with nonviolent Islamists has been quite limited, barring circumstances that necessitated such interactions. This is despite the Obama administration's efforts to integrate the role of religion into American foreign policy formulation.¹ A policy of non-engagement with nonviolent Islamists may harm U.S. interests in the region.

Engagement with Islamist parties and groups would recognize them as legitimate political actors in their own political systems. This requires that no distinction be made between secular and Islamist parties. Lack of communication likely may lead to policy choices that might undercut U.S. interests in the region. Hence, Islamists should be included in policy discussions when they assume governmental roles. When they are in opposition, the U.S. must establish communication in order to gain greater insight into the perspectives of these Islamist groups and their large constituencies, allowing for opportunities to determine areas of disagreement and potential collaboration. Such engagement, however, should only apply to Islamists who reject violence and respect the electoral process.

The limitations of exclusively partnering with secular actors have become increasingly evident in recent years in the form of growing violence, democratic lapses, and deteriorating human development. The U.S. should therefore cautiously engage with Islamist parties while working on other channels. In particular, Ennahda Party in Tunisia, Party

for Justice and Development in Morocco, and Islamic Action Front in Jordan are candidates for such engagement. A multi-pronged policy that can engage both secular and nonviolent Islamist parties may produce a more successful foreign policy agenda that furthers short- and long-term U.S. objectives in the Middle East, including ending violence, establishing political stability, and promoting democratic governance.

WHY ENGAGE ISLAMISTS?

There are three reasons why engagement with nonviolent Islamists should be a priority. First, Islamists are the best organized political groups throughout the Middle East and are collectively the most popular political blocs. Ignoring these groups and their extensive support bases may undermine public perceptions of the U.S. and, by extension, weaken the legitimacy of U.S. regional policies. Indeed, survey data show that U.S. policies are largely viewed unfavorably throughout the region.² Second, Islamists wield extensive religious authority. While their discourse on socioeconomic matters and mass marginalization resonates with many, Islamists are also popular due to their successes in overlaying political rhetoric with religious parlance, regardless of their authenticity, or lack thereof, to Islamic tradition.

Third, Islamists historically have been the most vocal incubators of anti-American and anti-Western sentiment.³ This poses a distinctly new and potent threat to U.S. security. Recent evidence suggests that negative perceptions of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East can become the single



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most important cause of anti-American sentiment and acts of violence.⁴ In this regard, minimizing anti-American sentiment is paramount.

SHORT-TERM BENEFITS

In the short-term, engagement with nonviolent Islamists can curb anti-American sentiment and legitimize counter violent extremism efforts. Typically, anti-American sentiment infused with religious discourse boosts opposition to U.S. policies and spurs detractors to engage in violent reprisal. Islamists have always faced pressure from secular opposition groups and governments. They are in search of new roles in the post-Arab Spring era in Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, Jordan, and Libya. Yet since the Arab Spring, Islamists feel intense competition from extremist militant groups, or radical jihadists, for conservative constituencies. While secular pressures have led to Islamists' exclusion from power, mostly in tandem with U.S. policy priorities in the region,⁵ radical jihadists are an entirely new source of political competition.

It is crucial to note that engagement with Islamists is not a one-sided deal. Just as it would benefit the U.S., it would also provide Islamists the political legitimacy they fervently seek. Islamists are generally pragmatic political actors who have a knack for compromise. As the cases of Tunisian Ennahda and the Moroccan Party for Justice and Development Party clearly demonstrate, Islamists will value political opportunities. Nonviolent Islamists have a vested interest in separating themselves from radical jihadists in order to gain external recognition and legitimacy.

LONG-TERM BENEFITS

A long-term solution to the region's deep-seated problems requires addressing root causes. Lack of education, political repression, underdevelopment, and high levels of inequality contribute to political extremism and violence. One of the most effective means of incentivizing Islamists toward the democratic process is through

economic reforms. In countries where economic liberalization reforms are inclusive and benefit the previously marginalized Islamic support base, both the Islamic constituency and Islamist parties become more open to pluralism and democratic governance.⁶ The implications of this process of engagement go beyond Islamists themselves. The support base of Islamist groups is composed of undereducated masses with significant levels of religious sensitivity and a deep perception of political and economic marginalization. Providing this constituency with a stake in the future of their countries via economic transformation will create a robust incentive mechanism for enduring social transformation and also prevent a possible slide to jihadism. When nonviolent Islamists and radical jihadists share ideological similarities as it relates to anti-Westernism, instrumental use of religion, and political exclusion, anchoring nonviolent Islamists in the democratic process will help create a permanent wedge between the two and further legitimize the electoral process over its alternatives. Thus, the next administration should prioritize supporting economic change in regional economies to pave the way for long-lasting socioeconomic transformation, which will usher in greater democratization and make Islamists and their social support bases part of this process.

ENDNOTES

1. Office of Religion and Global Affairs, U.S. Department of State: <http://bit.ly/2gHsjVu>.
2. Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes Project (2012): <http://pewrsr.ch/2ghr1gH>.
3. "It's the Policy Stupid: Political Islam and US Foreign Policy" by John L. Esposito: <http://bit.ly/2foo8v1>.
4. Sam Mullins, "The Road to Orlando: Jihadist-Inspired Violence in the West, 2012–2016," Combatting Terrorism Center at West Point, June 16, 2016: <http://bit.ly/2f3HaZm>.
5. Amaney Jamal, *Of Empires and Citizens: Pro-American Democracy or No Democracy at All?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).
6. A.Kadir Yildirim, *Muslim Democratic Parties in the Middle East: Economy and Politics of Islamist Moderation*. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2016).