Domestic Dynamics of Political Islam in the Greater Middle East

Case Studies of Jordan, Egypt, Kuwait and Turkey

Amanda Rudman, Cornell University, Arts and Sciences, 2009

Kevin Schoonover, Cornell University, Arts and Sciences, 2010

Arthur Neron-Bancel, Cornell University, Agriculture, 2009

Israel Barriga, Cornell University, Arts and Sciences, 2009

These four nations showcase the state of Islamism as a political force in the Middle East. Because of differing political circumstances in each state, the impact and viability of following Muslim law varies. In order to best explain why this is so, we will explore the political background of each nation, as well as discuss the current political climates of the countries in question. Finally, we will postulate as to what type of impact the ascension of an Islamic government will have on relations with the Western world, whether it be European nations, as is the case with Turkey, or the United States, as with Kuwait, Jordan and Egypt. The implications of this possibility are enormous; therefore, we feel that the importance of understanding the region cannot be overstated.

Jordan

Throughout the Arab World, Islamist parties are gaining support and winning elections. Jordan is no exception to this trend. Activity amongst Islamist supporters has peaked in the past few years in concert with Islamist political gains across the region. Support for Islamist political parties is based in discontent with current government and levels of democratization in Jordan.

Political Background

Jordan is a constitutional monarchy and its current constitution was first ratified in 1951. During King Hussein's reign, from 1953 until his death in 1999, he often restricted civil liberties to stabilize his rule against challengers. The government instituted an agenda of political liberalization in the early 1990s culminating in the legalization of political parties in 1992. Despite these positive efforts, King Abdullah II dissolved Parliament in 2001 to prevent challenges to his rule. Parliamentary and municipal elections were last held in 2003 and the current Prime Minister was appointed in 2005. Though the current cabinet has set ambitious goals of reforms, they have not been very successful and opposition is constantly growing.¹

Current Politics

The Islamic Action Front (IAF), the main opposition to the King's government in Jordan, is the political arm of the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood. The IAF has a crucial, yet dual role in Jordanian politics. It has encouraged political liberalization, democratization, and anticorruption policies. But it has also inspired Jordan's elite to fear a loss of control, and therefore to reverse democratic reforms. Additionally, any outcome requires the assistance of the United States (US). It is essential that Jordan reconciles the popular support for the IAF, the fears of the elite, and the need for democratization so that it can become a stable, sustainable country which allows the freedom of its people.

Though somewhat reserved for the past few years, after Hamas' January 2006 electoral victory and the successes of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, the IAF has become exceptionally active in Jordanian politics. It has focused on themes of anticorruption and good-government (like Hamas) and social-welfare networks (like the Muslim Brotherhood). Most importantly, the IAF is calling for democracy, deliberately echoing President Bush and Secretary Rice.²

Even without this new push, the IAF is still the largest political force in Jordan. Jordan currently has about thirty political parties; however these parties do not play a large role in parliament. Out of 110 members in the lower house, only 25 represent a political party. In early 2007 17 of these 25 members were representatives of the IAF, meaning they were the largest elected group in Jordanian politics.³

This intense popular support is very troubling to King Abdullah II. These fears could negatively affect Jordan's relationship with the US. Indeed, for the US to make the political system work, it must be more open.⁴ The Jordanian government opposes this political liberalization, as it believes the IAF and Islamists would take over.

In April 2007, Abdullah II encouraged the passage of a law that is supposed to "modernize Jordan's political system"⁵ by creating large national political parties. But the law has very strict requirements for each group that wishes to be an official party.⁶ Though the stated goal of large national parties will certainly be reached, the unstated goals of destroying the power of the IAF and enforcing the standing of the elite will also be realized.

Both the IAF and the King are doing as much as possible to protect themselves from each other. The IAF has attempted to dilute the power of Abdullah II by campaigning on anti-corruption. At the same time, Abdullah II has attempted to reduce the power of the IAF by creating new reforms which weaken the influence of political parties. Neither of these programs will lead to a sustainable, democratic society. The popular support and power of the IAF must be reconciled with the power of the elite within a democratic framework. Only when both sides have compromised in a power-sharing arrangement can the stability of the government be ensured. Neither the government, nor the opposition, has shown that they have all of the answers and are ready to lead a free society.

With parliamentary elections approaching this fall, there has been a scramble of last minute political activity. The IAF boycotted the municipal elections this past summer and when this article went to press had still not decided whether or not they would participate in the parliamentary elections.⁷ If the IAF does not participate in the upcoming elections, supporters of the monarchy will retain control of the government. This consolidation of power will strongly influence the government's next steps towards reform.

Implications for Western Relations

Though reforms by the elite are claimed as responses to the United States advocating democratization, the party platform of the IAF has been based on the same call. Because the IAF is acting according to the interests and advocacy of the United States, Abdullah II cannot hope to improve U.S.-Jordanian relations through his reforms. At the same time, the IAF will not be able to gain control of government with the support of the United States until it proves it is truly separate from its hard-line, terrorist neighbors. Both sides must attempt true democratic reform to avoid upsetting relations with the United States and to ensure a freer society for their own people.

Turkey

Rarely has an empire been as durable as that of the Ottomans. Established in 1299, the Ottoman Empire's influence spanned more than seven centuries; at the pinnacle of its power, it controlled territory in three continents and served as the only balance to Western European power in the Muslim world. However, by the turn of the 20th century it had been greatly diminished; after its defeat at the hands of the Entente powers during the First World War, the Empire collapsed, eventually being replaced by the Republic of Turkey. Established by the government of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk

in October of 1923, the new Turkish nation put an overwhelming emphasis on the merits of secular democracy. The leaders of the new republic were wary of a possible return to Turkey's Islamic roots, and therefore tried to reform practices, which they felt undermined the secular nature of their country. The most notable attempts included trying to get women to forsake traditional Muslim garb in favor of European garments, giving full rights and equality under the law to women, making secular education compulsory, and abolishing all religious courts⁸. It is clear that Atatürk's vision of a modern Turkey was predicated upon Western ideals.

Political Background

However, in the eight decades since Atatürk established the Republic, the religious influence he worked so diligently to suppress has experienced a resurgence as a viable school of political thought. Thanks in large part to the multi-party system, the Democratic Party replaced the People's Party (now the Republican People's Party) by appealing to many of the fundamentalist Muslims who had never embraced the liberal ideas espoused by Atatürk. The Democrats allowed certain religious practices to resume in public life, such as the broadcasting of the Koran over the state radio.

Yet the reign of the Democratic Party was short-lived, and the events that surrounded its downfall are indicative of what has happened every time a Turkish government begins to stray too far from its secular roots. In 1960, the Turkish military intervened, claiming that the Democratic Party was betraying the secularism. This interference was repeated most notably in 1971, 1980 and 1997. Yet Muslim political activity was far from quelled; in a country that is 99.8 percent Muslim, this should not come as a surprise. The Party for National Order was established in 1970 as the main political avenue for Islamists; it has

undergone numerous changes in name, but its core ideology has remained intact. Under the guise of the National Salvation Party (NSP), the group was able to gain forty-eight seats in Turkey's parliament, making it the third-largest political party in the government. However, the NSP continued to lose influence, eventually succumbing to the Prosperity Party in 1980. In 1995, the Prosperity Party won 30.4 percent of the Turkish vote and established a cabinet headed by nineteen Prosperity members and eighteen True Path Party members, a right-of-center Islamist group.⁹

Current Politics

While the True Path and Prosperity parties are no longer as powerful as they once were (True Path received only 9.55% of the vote in 2002, Turkey's last election), they have been replaced by the Justice and Development Party (AKP), which has been enormously successful. In 2001, the AKP leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, was elected to the post of Prime Minister, resulting mostly from the AKP's ability to end the inflation which plagued the nation in the early years of the decade. Known as a moderate Islamist party, the AKP embodies many of the values held by Muslims throughout the nation and serves as the most viable alternative to the otherwise secular governing parties.

So how much influence does religion have in the Turkish state? It is clear that Islamism has long been a force in a traditionally secular state, but that religious parties have been held in check by various institutions, such as the military and the courts. Yet it is apparent that the nation is now at a crossroad. In the midst of presidential elections that occurred earlier this year, the same forces that have always preserved the secular roots of the nation engaged in a struggle against the largely Islamist government. The parliament put forth both Erdoğan and Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül as their choices for the position of President, but the elections

designed to confirm them were repeatedly blocked. In Turkey's parliamentary system the people are not allowed to directly elect a candidate, which has left opponents of an Islamist government with few options for blocking their appointment. The secularists had, however, proven to be quite successful thus far: Gül's nomination was met with one of the largest protests in Turkey, in which over a million Turks took to the streets of Istanbul and Ankara in order to voice their opposition to the perceived undermining of Atatürk's principles. Similarly, the Turkish constitutional court attempted to stop the election of Gül on May 1, citing concerns over his Islamist policies as their primary rationale.¹⁰ The Turkish military issued a stern warning that it would not allow the government to stray from its secular roots, saying, "It should not be forgotten that the Turkish armed forces is one of the sides in this debate and the absolute defender of secularism...When necessary, they will display its stance and attitudes very clearly."¹¹

But on August 28, the Turkish political sphere was rocked when Gül was confirmed as the 11th President of the Republic of Turkey. The importance of the appointment of a traditional Islamist cannot be overstated; never since the Ottomans have the lines between the secular government and religious establishment been so blurred. However, Gül was quick to assuage the fears of opponents who feel his election signals the downfall of the secular state, saying in his inaugural address, "Secularism - one of the main principles of our republic - is a precondition for social peace as much as it is a liberating model for different lifestyles."¹² Furthermore, he is expected to support his claim by leaving the AKP and focusing on Turkey's membership in the European Union (EU). In all, it is hard to view Gül as the mortal threat to Atatürk's secular legacy that his opponents make him out to be.

Implications for Western Relations

What does all of this mean? It is easy enough to look at the events that have unfolded in Turkey over the years solely in the context of their impact on a democratic nation, in which case there is nothing particularly notable about the situation. Parties and people evolve, and branches of government are often in conflict. However, when you attempt to interpret how this history will impact the future of the state, you realize that Turkey is not merely undergoing a political evolution; in fact, we are witnessing a monumental clash between politics and religion. Turkey has long been recognized as the link between East and West. The nation sits on a fault line between civilizations, and the decision to elect a prominent Islamist to the post of President signals that the significance of the historical presence of religion will not soon be forgotten.

The desire to associate with European culture caused Turkey to seek admission into the EU; however, the fact that the population is overwhelmingly Muslim has been a source of consternation for many in Europe who worry that inundating the EU with 70 million Muslims would cause it to lose its institutional and cultural identity.¹³ While it is essential to note that there still remain significant political barriers to the accession of Turkey into the EU (such as issues in Cyprus and a refusal to admit crimes against Armenians), the biggest issue remains apprehension over whether Muslim Turks and Christian Europeans can overcome the lack of a common identity. The Islamist ideology of Turkey's current government has caused anxiety amongst those who feel that the AKP has undermined the secular nature of the democracy. What makes the situation even more ironic is that a military coup on the side of the secularists would seem to belie political instability, which is even more of a concern than the ideological differences. Regardless, it would seem as though Turkey's confirmation as an

EU member is not imminent.

Islamism has always been a force in Turkish politics. With an almost entirely Muslim population, this is not very surprising. So what does this mean for Turkey's future, particularly as it relates to relations with the West? Some, such as President George Bush and former Prime Minister Tony Blair, feel that even an Islamist Turkey will provide hope for democracy in the Middle East, demonstrating that seemingly incompatible ideologies can, in fact, be reconciled.¹⁴ Others feel as though Turkey is isolating itself both from Europe, because it is too Asian, and from Asia, because it is too European. The reality may be closer to the center: while Turkey has long held European ideals, its culture is still fundamentally Middle Eastern. The nation will never adopt the completely secular policies of most European nations, but neither is it in any danger of becoming an Islamist theocracy in the mold of Iran or Saudi Arabia. Whether Turks can ultimately unite their desire to emphasize Muslim values with their aspiration to take advantage of the economic and political advantages associated with EU membership is a question that will not be

definitively answered for some time, but it seems as though the prospects of such an occurrence are growing dimmer as the secular and religious institutions grow farther apart.

Egypt

Current Politics

Over the past six years, within the framework of the U.S.-led 'war on terror', leaders such as Egypt's Mubarak and Algeria's Bouteflika have been able to exploit the threat of terrorism to justify the brazen reinforcement of the authoritarian nature of their regimes. In these countries, it is becoming increasingly obvious that the sudden rise in popularity of Islamic movements can be partially explained as a reaction to the continued despotism of governmental elites. Desperate for change, an overwhelming number of citizens are turning to the Islamic groups that sometimes represent, if not the most appealing, at least the most proactive and promising alternative to oppression.

In recent years, both the dismantling of terrorist networks and the promotion of democracy throughout the Middle East and North Africa have established themselves

as central pillars of post-9/11 American foreign policy. In the eyes of a staunchly neoconservative Bush administration devoted to its epic Wilsonian battle to bring freedom and democracy to the Muslim world, political developments taking place in Egypt cannot help but be of central importance. Home to the Arab world's largest population and widely recognized as a traditional hub of Arab culture and politics, Egypt has also spent the last quarter-century under the oppressive control of an autocratic regime and has become a fluid exporter of dangerous radicals and extremists, such as Al Qaeda senior member Ayman al-Zawahiri.

Since 2001, Mubarak's regime has become a key ally for the United States in its efforts to quell nascent terrorist networks in the Arab world. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice recently observed that the United States benefited from a "strategic partnership" with Egypt that constituted a "cornerstone of U.S. policy in the Middle East."¹⁵ At a time when the United States is having difficulty maintaining, let alone establishing, alliances with Arab countries, it can hardly afford to jeopardize those alliances that it does have. Thus, even though such a move might go against popular demand in Egypt, the United States needs to support the Egyptian regime simply because turning against Mubarak and his National Democratic Party could potentially threaten the political stability of the nation. It is important to note that, since 1979 shortly after the Camp David Accords, "Egypt [has been] the second largest recipient of U.S. foreign aid... [receiving] about US\$1.3 billion in military aid and about US\$800 million in economic assistance"¹⁶ annually. This financial support should theoretically give the United States substantial leverage over Mubarak and help to pressure him into adopting effective democratic reforms. And yet the United States has taken relatively little advantage of its position of power. In recent years,

the Bush administration has shown no signs of trying to reprimand Mubarak for his oppressive methods by reducing the amount of foreign aid they provide Egypt annually. This lack of reaction to Mubarak's authoritarianism can be interpreted as a reflection of how vulnerable the United States has become in regards to regional politics. But it can also further be seen as a testimony of "the tacit support the American government provides Egypt's growing dictatorship. 'American policy has decided stability is more important than democracy,' said George Ishaq, a leader of the opposition Kifaya movement"¹⁷.

Contemporary Egypt

Within the context of the American anti-terrorism campaign, Mubarak's administration, emboldened by its American backing, has been able to continue to ignore human and civil rights by supposedly acting for the sake of peace and security.¹⁸ In a 2007 report entitled "Systematic abuses in the name of security," Amnesty International notes that "torture and other ill-treatment, arbitrary arrests and detention, and grossly unfair trials before emergency and military courts have all been key features of Egypt's 40-year state of emergency and counter-terrorism campaign."¹⁹

A couple of recent examples reflect the deceptive and autocratic methods of Mubarak. In regards to the presidential elections, which were "marred by voter irregularities and intimidation,"²⁰ he took the necessary steps to ensure that his opponents would not stand a chance. Furthermore, many supporters of the opposition were rapidly disqualified from the electoral process. And finally, the government arrested Mubarak's popular opponent, Ayman Nour, the founder of the independent and secular al-Ghad party, only several months before the elections.²¹⁻
²² Ayman Nour's example provides an idea of how dangerous it can be for an individual to present himself as an independent liberal

candidate in Egypt, and especially to appear as an appealing and promising alternative to the repressive Mubarak.

Rise of the Muslim Brotherhood

In protest to the rising levels of authoritarianism in Egypt, a growing number of Egyptians are turning to Islamist parties, among which the most popular has proven to be the Muslim Brotherhood. In 2005 Parliamentary elections, to the great surprise of many, the Egyptian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood won roughly 20% of the Parliament seats. According to Edam Gad, "the crises plaguing the secular opposition are also the result of a longstanding government strategy of pre-empting the emergence of secular alternatives to the NDP".²³ In any case, it appears that the Muslim Brotherhood is proving itself as an efficient political organization.

Mubarak's has acquired such a firm control over Egyptian politics that he no longer needs to worry about being reelected. Government officials have no reason to satisfy the needs of the Egyptian people. The absence of governmental intervention to solve issues of unemployment and poor living conditions in many parts of Egypt, combined with rampant abuses of power, has created tremendous dissatisfaction within the Egyptian population. As a result, many Egyptians are increasingly eager for any political change that might lead to improved living conditions.

The Muslim Brotherhood, on the contrary, in its struggle to accumulate support within Egyptian society, has been making itself directly available to constituents in the neighborhoods they represent. However, plagued by a long tradition of extremism and violence, it is still looked upon by many with high doses of skepticism and suspicion.

Historically, the organization seems to have struggled with the diverging pull of two contradictory forces. On the one

hand, the Brotherhood has benefited from the leadership of supreme guides such as the movements founder, Hassan al-Banna. Unlike the Brotherhood's radical elements, men like Hassan al-Banna were predominantly devoted to moderation and openness, and the movement has, at times, stressed the importance of pacifism and dialogue. Yet the Brotherhood can also be held responsible for the assassination of a Prime Minister, of President Sadat, and for countless other acts of terrorism. It has also provided a platform for prominent radicals such as Sayyid Qutb, author of the militant and revolutionary "Milestones" and mentor to modern-day extremists such as Al-Qaeda's Ayman al-Zawahiri.²⁴

In recent years, since officially renouncing violence in the 1970's, the Egyptian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood has made considerable efforts to present itself as an organized and trustworthy political force. In an article for the *New York Times Magazine* entitled "Islamic Democrats?," a member of the Brotherhood's parliamentary bloc expressed this concern: 'We would like to change the idea people have of us in the West, because when people hear the name Muslim Brotherhood, they think terrorism. We want to establish the perception of an Islamic group concerned about human rights.'²⁵

Nevertheless, many people remain skeptic about the Muslim Brotherhood today. Some critics have a hard time trusting the Brotherhood, afraid that behind its peaceful and moderate rhetoric, the organization might retain the same radical designs of a state based on the precepts of Islam.

In the end, despite all the doubts and skepticism that surround the Muslim Brotherhood, the facts remain the same: support for the Islamist political movement is rising. It is interesting to note the extent to which the circumstances that are fueling the Brotherhood's popularity today are similar to those that first vitalized the movement

in the 1930's. Having lost all faith in the current political regime, Egyptians view the Muslim Brotherhood as the most potent vehicle for political change and they turn to it as their only chance to see the end of Mubarak's 'police state.'

Constitutional Changes

Most recently, in early 2007, despite widespread protests and boycotts, Mubarak's administration forced constitutional changes through both the parliament and a public referendum that will serve to further centralize the distribution of powers. With amendments to the constitution, Mubarak has finally found a way to legitimize his undemocratic and authoritative activities. "Amnesty International called the changes 'the greatest erosion of human rights in 26 years.'"²⁶ Among other things, Mubarak has exploited the threat of terrorism to finally institutionalize some of the state-of-emergency laws on which he has relied since his rise to power in 1981.²⁷ Other amendments have established changes that will considerably hinder the

democratic process, especially for Islamic groups. One such amendment prohibits all official political parties from being based on religion. These changes reflect the fact that, since the success of the Muslim Brotherhood in the 2005 parliamentary elections, Mubarak has had to adapt to the new threat posed by Islamic political groups and especially the Muslim Brotherhood.

The political situation in Egypt reflects how a trend of growing authoritarianism among some North African states since 2001 has affected the domestic politics of these nations. Rather than be construed as proof of a deep conviction in the advantages of Islamic government, the widespread support that the Egyptian population is showing for the Muslim Brotherhood should be seen as an effort to promote change and to reject Mubarak's corrupt administration. Thus, for a country supposedly dedicated to stalling Islamist political groups and fostering democracy in countries across the Middle East and North Africa, the persistent support of the US for president Hosni Mubarak seems simply counterproductive. Instead of increasing the appeal of Islamist groups such as Muslim Brotherhood by propping up an overtly despotic and repressive regime, maybe the U.S should revise its policies and try to create a free and open political arena in Egypt. This move could restore faith in Western, and especially American, governmental institutions, and it would certainly help moderate secular movements to realize their true potential.

Kuwait Political Background

In the wake of the failed nationalism of the Nasser era and of the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979, governments across the Middle East are being constantly pressured to find a system that is deemed acceptable to devout Muslims. An Islamization of government is one path to reform suggested by rising political parties.

In the West, this is viewed as something completely counter to democracy; thus, any such action would further alienate the countries of the Middle East from the West. In countries where there are considerable gains from maintaining stable relations with the West, such as Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, an alienation of their top trading partners would be something to avoid. The disastrous conditions in Iraq that came about through sanctions imposed by the United Nations and the United States after the Persian Gulf War made clear that even the most oil rich nations can not prosper without some outlet to the West. However, an overly successful relationship with the West can lead to a lack of legitimacy for the government in the eyes of other Muslim states and religious Muslim citizens. For the Kuwaiti government, therefore, a middle ground must be found in order to maintain economic and political stability.

Western influence and interest in Kuwait predates Kuwait's independence. In 1913 the British and the Ottomans convened to discuss the status of Kuwait's autonomy. Both sides agreed that Kuwait would remain as part of the Ottoman Empire. Following the First World War, Kuwait became a British protectorate. It was granted independence in 1961. As time went on, the US became Kuwait's primary relation in the West. The relationship between the two countries grew closer as the US protected Kuwaiti ships from Iran in a maritime protection program in 1987. After the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq, these relations grew even closer as the United States spearheaded UN Security Council demands that Iraq withdraw from Kuwait or be removed through force. After the US victory over Iraq in 1991, Kuwait renounced aspects of its boycott of Israel. Today, the United States has over 100 military contracts with Kuwait totaling over 8 billion dollars and the US remains Kuwait's biggest supplier of commercial goods and services.

Current Politics

The political system in Kuwait is a constitutional monarchy. The parliament has very little power over the monarch. Opposition to the crown is not tolerated, and there are many instances of newspapers being closed down and free speech rallies being dispersed. The resentment that forms because of this type of action is a handy tool for Islamist opponents to the regime. Thus, Islamic fundamentalism in Kuwaiti politics has found a comfortable home alongside outspoken, non-Islamist critics of the Kuwaiti regime. This alliance became so much of a threat to the crown that the Kuwaiti parliament has been shut down several times since the appearance of the Islamists in the late 1970's.

So what exactly are the specific aims of these Islamist politicians? They are proponents of a return to the Shariah, or law by Islamic decree. This in part comes from a notion that Islamic law is far more moral than any secular law.²⁸ Also, nostalgia for the system which characterized the powerful Islamic empires of ancient times also plays a role in the advocacy for Islamization of government.

One of the most important forces in the push for Islamic reform is the Kuwait Islamic Constitutional Movement or ICM. The ICM differs from many other Islamist movements because of its goal of Islamization through constitutional reform. While extreme Islamist movements tend to favor an overthrow of the government, the ICM looks to further its goals through legal government reform. This key difference makes the ICM a viable option for people who favor an Islamic version of government and law but do not adopt the use of violence.²⁹

The ICM is the legal wing of Kuwait's Muslim Brotherhood. The Muslim Brotherhood in Kuwait was formally linked to its parent organization in Egypt until 1991. Its main functions are in the areas of charity and social functions. However,

it did make occasional forays into politics; the most notable during the suspension of parliament in 1976. When parliament was reinstated in 1981, the Muslim Brotherhood won a few seats. The biggest political breakthrough for the organization came in 1990 when Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait; this led to the creation of the ICM.³⁰ The younger members of the Muslim Brotherhood stayed in Kuwait and formed a resistance movement. It was these resistance fighters who later created the ICM, these same men also broke ties with the Muslim Brotherhood outside of Kuwait claiming that not enough support was given to help liberate Kuwait.

Although no one Islamic movement has been powerful enough to win a majority in parliament, Islamic movements and the ICM in particular were instrumental in forming a reformist majority that was elected in the 2006 parliamentary elections. When the Amir died and a power struggle broke out between the Royal Family in 2006, the ICM used the confusion created to reach out to populist and leftist movements to form a reformist coalition.³¹

Implications for Western Relations

Many political leaders simply use Islamist rhetoric to win office. Much of this rhetoric feeds off of a latent resentment towards the US due to its support of Israel and its war in Afghanistan. Some political candidates use images of "collateral damage" in Afghanistan as campaign propaganda.³² Once elected, these politicians tend not to implement Islamist policies. Instead, they pursue goals that draw them closer to the West and to the US in particular. A concrete example of this game is the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

There is no question that the biggest threat to Kuwaiti security over the years has been Saddam Hussein's Iraq. Thus, it would serve the secular political interests of Kuwait to enter into an alliance with the United States against Iraq. Kuwait had been a

major player in the Iraq containment efforts of the 1990's and prior to the invasion.³³ Yet, Kuwait's opportunity to be free of the threat of Saddam Hussein came at a time when anti-American sentiments were high. Therefore, an alliance with the United States would have been politically unsustainable. How, then, did the government of Kuwait act in its interest while retaining its legitimacy? The solution to this dilemma was to do both. The government publicly opposed the US led invasion of Iraq. At the same time, it made available 60% of its territory to the Coalition in order to station soldiers and equipment in preparation for the invasion.³⁴

Without the specter of Saddam Hussein, the Kuwaiti regime thought that its sovereignty would be secure. But it now has to face the rising Iran. The crown has a new fear, a repeat of the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran. As is the case in Iraq, Kuwait is alarmed at Iran's pull over the Shia Muslim population. Although Kuwait is a primarily Sunni country, there is concern that a sizeable portion of the population (over 25%) could become controlled by Iran.³⁵ The government of Kuwait is at an extremely perilous junction. The crown has done just enough to retain a sliver of legitimacy among the people. In addition, continued influence from Iran might serve to radicalize the Shia portion of the population, and radical Sunni groups such as al-Qaeda may also gain ground. What would ultimately follow is a destabilization of the entire political and governmental process. Such a rapid dissolution of an already weak authority would be nothing short of disastrous.

Conclusion

In each country, political Islamism has evolved as an alternative to the current governments. Islamist political parties advocate governmental reform and an increase in civil liberties which are attractive promises in light of the hardships present

in each country. In Turkey, economic troubles have led to an upswing in popular support for the Islamist AKP Party. In Egypt and Kuwait, Islamist groups have gained support as a response to the government's abuse of power, while in Jordan Islamist groups have gained power because of political liberalization, though they still act as an opposition party. In each case, Islamist parties have gained power because the people want a true change in their governments.

It remains to be seen what kind of impact this change will have on the relations between Turkey, Egypt, Kuwait and Jordan and the West. While the US and its European allies stress the benefits of democratic freedoms, it is certain that the rise of Islamist governments throughout the Middle East would be a less than welcome occurrence. In Egypt, the renewed prominence of the Muslim Brotherhood has caused consternation among Western nations that view the group as a terrorist organization, and has lead to speculation that their election could

result in sanctions such as those put into place against Palestine upon the election of Hamas; in Kuwait, the specter of losing a key ally in the event of a loss of monarchical power has the US similarly concerned. Yet the shift in power is not always seen as detrimental. In Turkey, for instance, the election of Abdullah Gül signals a renewed vigor in the fight for admittance in the European Union, while in Jordan the message of democratic reform put forth by the leading Islamist groups is met with applause by Western nations. It seems that when the desire for governance by an Islamist party is coupled with the promise to maintain practices seen as beneficial by the West, no problem is likely to arise; but if the party in question seems capable of disrupting the status quo, opposition on the part of the international community will be fierce. Whether these scenarios will play out as anticipated remains to be seen, but it is undeniable that in the face of an unstable international arena, the citizens of the Middle East are once again turning to their faith for guidance.

Endnotes

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- 6 *Ibid.*
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