



PROJECT *on* Middle East Democracy

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The International Forum for Democratic Studies and the National Endowment for Democracy
“Islamist Parties and Democracy”

1025 F. Street, N.W., Suite 800, Washington, D.C.
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The International Forum for Democratic Studies and the National Endowment for Democracy invited **Hillel Fradkin, Amr Hamzawy, Laith Kubba, and Tamara Cofman Wittes** to assess the rise of Islamist parties and its implications for democracy in the region. Hillel Fradkin is a director at the Hudson Institute. Amr Hamzawy is a senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Laith Kubba is senior director at the National Endowment for Democracy and served as chief press spokesperson for Iraq's Prime Minister al-Jaffari. Tamara Cofman Wittes is a director at the Brookings Institution's Saban Center for Middle East Policy. **Marc Plattner** of the International Forum for Democratic Studies and Vice President at the National Endowment for Democracy moderated the event.

Marc Plattner began the event by outlining the framework posed by the editors of the Journal of Democracy to each of the contributing authors. Each was asked to define “Islamism” and address **whether an Islamist party must entertain certain positions regarding Islamic law, the advocacy of violence, the rights of minorities and women, or a minimum set of liberal principles before they can participate in a democracy**, as well as to recommend how governments should deal with the range of Islamist parties.

Tamara Cofman Wittes argued that the military coup in Algeria has largely defined how the U.S. views Islamist parties (“the nightmare vision of what democracy would bring the Middle East”) and has led to a failure to create a sophisticated foreign policy that differentiates among Islamist groups. She **recommended using the same criteria to judge Islamist parties as is used for liberal ones (attitudes towards pluralism, equality, internal governance, and transparency)** and argued that improving the quality of government institutions will improve the quality of political parties. “Improved political freedom is a key requisite to the goal of clarifying the role that Islamists may play and preventing the outcome Westerners fear.”

Hillel Fradkin illuminated the common origin of Islamist parties as hostile to modern liberal states and asked the \$64,000 question: Does this history still matter? Fradkin answered with a qualified “yes,” as far as it points to what these organizations must overcome in order to become participants. The real proof of how Islamist parties will operate will be in the pudding, however, the limited examples from Turkey, Jordan, Morocco, and Iraq are ambiguous and difficult to generalize. **“Before we know, we need more experiments. The question for U.S. policy is whether we should encourage these experiments or not.”**

Laith Kubba shifted the focus on the debate. “The real issue is not about Islamists or secularists, but who is authoritarian, and who isn’t.” **Kubba recommended engaging with Islamist parties as they begin to shape their political ideologies** and emphasized the importance of the context in which Islamist parties come to power. When Islamists come to power in chaos or by revolution, the tendency is to become autocrats themselves (“to replace one autocrat with another”). However, “if you have strong, open states with strong institutions, the impact will be to moderate their views.” Therefore, **“we need to strengthen civil institutions and to allow the process to take place.”**

Amr Hamzawy sought to organize Islamist groups into categories based on patterns of participation. The first group includes those parties in Morocco, Algeria, Kuwait, and Bahrain, which are legally permitted to participate and are not subjected to cycles of intimidation. **The result has been a level of pluralism, a respect for the rule of law, and de-ideologization.** The second group includes Islamists in Egypt and Jordan, which are subject to cycles of intimidation and are pre-occupied by their Islamists beliefs. The challenge facing this group is how to maintain itself through the cycles of suppression and how to participate in a political structure that delegitimizes participation.

During the Q&A, **Tamara Wittes** argued that the actions of regional governments and external actors impact the evolution of Islamists groups. **“They are not evolving in a vacuum. And the U.S. is part of this. Rather than just sitting here, we must take responsibility for what happens next.”**

Laith Kubba argued “we need to keep our eyes on democratic rule and the participation of those who we differ with, **as long as the overall process is not undermined and general points of reference are not undermined.**”

Amr Hamzawy agreed that “all of the speakers highlighted the fact that the **environment can give Islamists parties incentives to develop along the democratic trajectory...**We should be asking ‘what incentives we have or lack in each country to encourage them to become more democratic?’”

Hillel Fradkin argued that discussion of the political role of Islam has been lacking, in part because Islamists themselves “have given little thought to what is possible, or even what works well or not. **We need to press them harder on the intellectual side, not just the institutional side.**”