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Debating the Arab Transformation

Hillel Fradkin ■ *Olivier Roy*

Debate

THERE WILL BE NO ISLAMIST REVOLUTION

Olivier Roy

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Hillel Fradkin has quite correctly summarized my analysis before criticizing it. Therefore, apart from the rather crucial detail of what the "failure of political Islam" means, there is no misunderstanding between us, but rather a decisive difference in approach and perspective. Fradkin is concerned about what constitutes the essence of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) as an ideological movement, whereas I concentrate on how the Muslim Brothers, as political and social actors, are shaped by the political, social, and religious context in which they now find themselves.

Fradkin's main argument is that my thesis on the reluctant entry of Islamists into the democratic process is belied by a "revolutionary dynamic" that is unfolding after some months of moderation and cautiousness; he stresses the fact that the MB has a clear-cut ideological blueprint that it is seeking to implement despite its tactical restraint. My view is that there is no such "revolutionary dynamic" and that the MB is no longer a revolutionary movement, but rather a conservative one. The Muslim Brothers are certainly not liberal, and they are thrilled by their sudden empowerment after many decades of longing in vain for access to power. They may try to establish an authoritarian state, but it would be conservative and rather pro-Western, more in Mubarak's style than Khomeini's, and would confront a strong democratic opposition. I maintain that 1) their "ideology" is more an emotional and vague narrative than a blueprint for ruling, and will mainly affect censorship and gender issues; 2) no dynamic of "Islamic revolution" is at work in either Egypt or Tunisia; and 3) because society itself has changed along

with the geostrategic context, the Islamists are shaped more by the new landscape than vice versa.

The first point is about the nature of the Muslim Brothers and their counterparts in other countries, such as Tunisia's Ennahda Party. Fradkin calls the Brotherhood a "revolutionary" ideological movement, like Nazism or Communism. Certainly, the MB has constructed Islam as a political ideology, in contrast to the purely legal approach of the *ulamas*, who see the implementation of *shari'a* as the sole criterion for an Islamic state. Certainly, too, the MB has also always believed state power to be the best tool for "re-Islamizing" society and thus has been striving to arrive at the helm of the state. But the MB is more than that. It is also a religious brotherhood and a social movement deeply rooted in society. If Egypt's old regime tolerated the Brotherhood for so long, it is precisely because its members were not involved in revolutionary activities such as planning an armed coup, an obsession of both the Nazis and communists in the 1930s (the Nazis surely would have seized power had they not won elections so quickly).

The MB, by contrast, always tried to negotiate with the ruling power and always strove to engage politically instead of relying on armed uprisings: If splinter groups like Gama'at Islamiyya and Jihad Islami resorted to violence, it was in opposition to the MB's moderation; seventy years of cautious politics hardly qualify a movement as revolutionary. Like the mid-twentieth-century French Communist Party, the Brotherhood focused on building a kind of "counter-society." But as the Brothers grew closer to the new middle class that benefited from the economic opening led by President Anwar Sadat (1970–81), they became more "gentrified" and grew distant from the new generation. Their charity networks were molded by a paternalistic attitude, and they lagged behind as other groups (from Salafis to labor unions) experienced a resurgence of militancy. The Arab Spring took the Brothers by surprise—a clear indication that they had given up any hope of a popular uprising against the regime. In the aftermath of the demonstrations, their actions were confused and clumsy before they determined their political line, which I expect to remain rather flexible and opportunistic, without a "revolutionary" or heavily ideological dimension, though we should not expect them to turn into whole-hearted democrats. They may use traditional, not revolutionary, authoritarian tools in order to stay in power: That is why during the November 2012 protests Morsi's opponents have called him the "new Pharaoh" and not the "new Khomeini."

The fact that the MB is not a "revolutionary" movement but a religious-conservative one reflects the rather conservative society to which it belongs: The Brotherhood's electoral constituency is certainly not revolutionary and will not flood the streets to demand the implementation of an Islamic state. The MB has put forward no blueprint for a "new society" (to say nothing of a new economy) beyond the imposition of

outward religious markers such as the veil and the ban on alcohol. In other words, the MB has no great geostrategic design beyond its general rhetoric about the solidarity of the Muslim *ummah*: This was made clear by its moderation during the November 2012 crisis between Hamas and Israel.

Of course, decades of repression and opposition have made the MB both cautious and vindictive, and it will do its best to hold on to its newfound power. The Brothers will appoint their militants and cronies to government posts, support censorship on grounds of “morality,” and balk at a free and independent press. In this sense, they are not liberal at all. They believe that their time is now, and they do not intend to miss it or to spoil it.

The Failure of Political Islam

The Brotherhood’s ideology provides neither a roadmap to the perfect Islamic society nor a guidebook for good governance. This is what I called the “failure of political Islam”—*not* the Islamists’ inability to come to power. I never claimed that the Islamists would not come to power, an assertion that Fradkin wrongly attributes to me. Rather, I said that the revolutionary dynamic in the Sunni countries had been exhausted, and that the ideological electoral constituency of the Islamists (except in extraordinary situations like Algeria in 1992) is only about 20 percent. When Islamist groups such as Turkey’s Justice and Development Party (AKP) manage to exceed this level during so-called normal times, it is because they have managed to appeal to different and more diverse constituencies—mainly conservative or nationalist voters, as well as the poor and the rising nonsecular middle class. Thus while the Muslim Brotherhood may finally have come to power, it is at the expense of its own ideology: The “failure of political Islam” is not the political failure of the Islamists; it is the collapse of Islamism as a political ideology.

In *The Failure of Political Islam* (1992), I predicted that the collapse of Islamism’s revolutionary momentum would be followed by two trends: 1) There would be a wave of “neofundamentalism” that stressed a strict return to purely religious norms (the call to implement *shari‘a*), replacing Islamism’s ideological-political agenda (building an Islamic state and institutions, setting up an “Islamic economy,” striving to build a transnational *ummah*, and so on). 2) There would be a move toward a “Muslim democracy” (along the lines of an assertive Christian democracy) that endorses nationalism and recasts Islamic norms as moral and cultural values with appeal to a larger conservative constituency. This is exactly where we are today, and the Brotherhood itself is torn between these two trends.

Nevertheless, it is true that the Brotherhood cannot abandon the centrality of religion in its discourse without losing its trademark, its identi-

ty, and its legitimacy—especially in a context rife with other contenders who make religious claims (Salafis, Sufis, and traditional religious institutions such as al-Azhar). To prove that the MB's ideology has remained unchanged, Fradkin extensively quotes Khairat al-Shater (the Brotherhood's original candidate for the 2012 presidential election), who hews to the group's traditional discourse, including the tenet that "Islam is the solution." Of course, there is an Islamic "political imaginary" haunted by nostalgia for the times of the Prophet, and this sentiment will fuel many more inflammatory speeches. It is important to note, however, that Shater is not in charge: He is neither Egypt's president nor the MB's Supreme Guide.

In any case, such a narrative cannot serve as a blueprint for governing a complex society. Thus there is a growing discrepancy between ideological references and real practices. This gap will be unsustainable unless the Brotherhood manages to recast its ideology in nontheological terms (that is, as a matter of ethics and identity). In fact, its "religious reference" has been turning into a conservative sociocultural agenda that has nothing to do with either "revolution" or an "Islamic state." The MB faces far greater domestic constraints and possesses far fewer means than revolutionary movements of the past. As a result, it must compromise.

Fradkin offers Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution as proof that revolutionary Islamists can ride a wave of revolt against dictatorship to establish a true Islamic state. But Iran's experience does not provide an apt comparison with the current upheavals in the Middle East. The Iranian revolution was a real revolution, characterized by the replacement of existing elites with members of other social groups; the use of armed violence; executions and massacres of opponents; the bloody settlement of accounts inside the new regime; the reshaping of the economy; and forced transformations in the daily lives of ordinary people. In Iran, there were no significant democratic movements involved in the revolt—the leftists, Islamo-leftists, and Khomeinists all rejected democracy. Demonstrators were not calling for liberal democracy, but rather for a revolutionary state (some for a "People's" state, others for an "Islamic" state).

Ayatollah Khomeini did not steal the revolutionary movement from liberals. On the contrary, he embodied the revolution. In Egypt today, there is no such charismatic leader, and all political leaders at the very least pay lip service to democracy, because it is the basis of their legitimacy. In Iran, the new regime established its monopoly on religion through a strong and politicized Shia clergy that existed prior to the revolution. There is no equally powerful clerical group in the Sunni countries, where religious diversity within Islam is flourishing. In Iran, the new regime quickly set up the Revolutionary Guard, which became the country's dominant military force. In Egypt, the army went back to the barracks (a prerequisite for any democracy), but it is not under the direct control of the Brotherhood. In Iran, the regime immediately embarked

on implementing a revolutionary foreign policy with the storming of the U.S. embassy, whereas in Egypt the new regime not only protected the U.S. embassy but did not close the Israeli embassy or give it to the Palestinians (who, incidentally, would have refused it).

The Illusion of Islamic Exceptionalism

To repeat, my disagreement with Fradkin is not about isolated facts but about his ideological and ahistorical approach. He sees the MB as a closed monadic party that operates in isolation from time and society: For seventy years it has maintained the same agenda, the same ideology, and the same organizational discipline, playing long-term politics on an abstract chessboard where its flexibility is solely tactical. In Fradkin's view, the MB has not changed and has no reason to change, and everything it does must be understood within the paradigm of "Islamic revolution." In this sense, Fradkin's approach is in line with the essentialist school of thought that considers politics among Muslims to be governed by some unchanging Koranic software implanted in their brains.

In fact, Islamists are products of modern history and society. The twentieth century was marked by revolution from 1917 to 1979—from the Bolshevik revolution to the Iranian revolution. But times have changed. In the 1980s, a process of democratization took hold in Latin America, communism imploded, and the Iranian revolution turned into a nightmarish fraud. (Who today would travel to Iran to learn how to build Islamism in the way that earlier generations flocked to Russia, China, and Cuba to learn how to "build socialism"?) In countries all over the world, former extremists and militants have become democratic leaders—examples include former Portuguese prime minister José Manuel Barroso (now president of the European Commission), Brazilian president Dilma Rousseff, and Northern Ireland's Deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness, to name only three. This, of course, does not mean that real democracy is firmly rooted in these countries; just as radicals can turn into democrats, newly minted democrats can turn into dictators. Today, however, dictatorships such as China's flourish by attenuating their ideology. Authoritarianism and ideology are two separate questions: If Morsi turns into a dictator, it will be at the expense of the Brotherhood's ideology and legitimacy. In a word, Fradkin's vision of revolution and ideology is largely anachronistic.

Moreover, the argument that the Arab world cannot democratize because the concept of democracy is a product of centuries of Western Christianity is rather biased. While it is true that a complex chain of events in European history first gave birth to modern democracy, capitalism, and human rights, the notion that they were the offspring of Christian theology is highly questionable. For two centuries, Arab countries have been struggling to cope with challenges from the West. Different countries have tried different models—from enlightened despotism to

revolutionary movements driven by charismatic leaders (and even including some short-lived democratic experiences). Over time, Arab societies have changed as a result of mass education and globalization, both of which have altered their social fabric and their political culture.

It is steadily becoming clearer that “Islamic exceptionalism” is an illusion: Both the political and the religious changes in Muslim societies are in tune with global trends. And as I tried to show in *Globalized Islam* (2004), what is perceived in the West as a *return* to a traditional and nostalgic Islam is, on the contrary, a profound *alteration* of traditional Islam, which is now giving way to a more open and diverse religious field. Just as the Protestant Reformation, despite aiming at a return to the scriptures, unwillingly opened the door to modern forms of religiosity, Islamism is opening the door to new forms of religiosity through its passage into politics. Moreover, fundamentalism, as both a tool and a consequence of the deculturation of Islam, has helped to introduce Islam to the global religious market.

The belief that young Muslims turn to religion only out of frustration and disenfranchisement reveals a negative and narrow conception of the “return of the sacred”: From San Francisco to Jerusalem and Paris to Cairo, the phenomena of religious conversion and becoming “born again” are more than just a response to social discontent. Indeed, after studying these trends for my book *Holy Ignorance* (2010), I concluded that the social sciences, not to mention politicians and journalists, have a problem with religion and tend to see it only as a source of trouble.

This is reflected in Fradkin’s conclusion, which warns of the “international consequences of prolonged religious warfare in the Middle East” that might result from the MB’s access to power. To what is he referring? If “religious warfare” is a euphemism for the Israeli-Arab conflict, the role of the MB can only be secondary, because that conflict is above all a national, not a religious, one. No sustainable peace between Israel and the Arab states will be achieved in the absence of elected governments—in other words, there can be no peace without democracy, and in Egypt there can be no democracy without the Muslim Brothers.

Fradkin seems tacitly to refer to Samuel P. Huntington’s “clash of civilizations” thesis, yet the MB is not pretending to unite the *ummah* against the West. The Brotherhood needs the West for economic development and fears the threat of a nuclear Iran. Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood did not incite the civil war in Syria, but it joined the West in rejecting Bashar al-Assad’s bloody dictatorship.

Finally, Fradkin’s essay lacks a conclusion. He advocates no particular policy and offers no advice for the international community beyond caution, circumspection, and suspicion. Wariness, however, is not a policy. Pragmatic engagement, on the other hand, at least has the potential to help support democratization in the Arab world.