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The Transformation of the Arab World

Olivier Roy

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THE ARAB WORLD

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The "Arab Spring" at first had nothing about it that was specifically "Arab" or "Muslim." The demonstrators were calling for dignity, elections, democracy, good governance, and human rights. Unlike any Arab revolutionary movements of the past sixty years, they were concerned with individual citizenship and not with some holistic entity such as "the people," the Muslim *umma,* or the Arab nation. The demonstrators referred to no Middle Eastern geopolitical conflicts, burned no U.S. or Israeli flags, offered no chants in favor of the main (that is to say, Islamist) opposition parties, and expressed no wish for the establishment of an Islamic state or the implementation of *shari'a.* Moreover, despite the Western media's frantic quest to put a face on events by talking up some of the protests' astonishingly young and modern spokespersons, the demonstrators produced no charismatic leaders. In short, the Arab Spring belied the "Arab predicament": It simply would not follow the script which holds that the centrality of the Arab-Israeli conflict is fostering an ever-growing Islamization within Arab societies, a search for charismatic leaders, and an identification with supranational causes.

But the demonstrators did not take power—indeed, they did not even try. Instead, they merely wanted to establish a new political scene. Predictably, the Egyptian and Tunisian elections brought ballot-box triumphs for Islamist parties. With deep roots in society, enjoying a legitimacy con-

ferred by decades of political opposition, and defending conservative and religious values shared by most of the populace, Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood and Tunisia's Ennahda party were able to attract votes from well beyond their respective hardcore bases because they looked like credible parties of government. More surprising was the strong showing of the Salafist al-Nur Party in Egypt. Even allowing for Salafism's rise in that country, the sudden transformation of an apolitical and informal school of thought into a successful political movement shows that no single Islamist party can claim a monopoly over the expression of Islam in the political sphere.

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In any case, the actors who have taken to the electoral stage and benefited from the Arab Spring, whether familiar like the Islamists of the Muslim Brotherhood or newcomers like the Salafists, are not known for their attachment to democracy. Even if they have given up talk of the "Islamic revolution," they still put religion at the heart of their agenda. Islamists and Salafists alike deplore secularization, the influence of Western values, and the excesses of individualism. Everywhere, they seek to affirm the centrality of religion to national identity, and they are conservative in all areas except the economy. And in Egypt, as commonly happens with parties that are swept into power by landslide margins, they are tempted to think that they can dispense with the grubby business of having to form alliances and hand out government posts equitably. And why should Islamists, with no democratic culture to speak of, behave like good democrats who believe in pluralism?

Once the election results came in, the Western media's enthusiasm faded, and headlines celebrating a democracy-friendly Arab Spring gave way to coverage worrying about the onset of a neoauthoritarian "Arab Winter." Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the Taliban were casting long shadows over Tunis and Cairo. Was there any obstacle to Islamization in the last other than the Egyptian army, whose aversion to democracy is well known? Was the Arab Middle East hopelessly trapped, with no better choices than "secular" dictatorship or "Islamic" totalitarianism?

The answer to that last question is no. Something irreversible did happen in the Arab Spring. Whatever ups and downs may follow, we are witnessing the beginning of a process by which democratization is becoming rooted in Arab societies. Democratization is very much a process in this case—not a program of government implemented by deep-dyed democrats. Comparisons with other world regions (such as Latin America) are difficult, since the Middle East is the only place where

the dominant opposition consists of strongly centralized and ideological parties with a religious agenda. A possible comparison might be with the Spanish and Portuguese communist parties of the late 1970s: Like the Islamists of Egypt and Tunisia, they too benefited from a democratization process that they did not trigger. Yet the Iberian communists never achieved the control over elected parliaments that Islamists now enjoy in Cairo and Tunis. Whatever their own agendas, the communist parties had no choice but to negotiate.

The Islamist parties may have more power and freedom to maneuver, but they too will find themselves being pushed to adjust to the democratization process. The pushing will be done by the constraints and dynamics characteristic of the social, religious, political, and geostrategic fields in which these parties must operate. They may accept the demands of the democratization process more willingly (Ennahda) or less willingly (the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood), but accept them they will, or they will find themselves sidelined. This is not a question of who has or does not have a hidden agenda, or of whether Islam and democracy can or cannot be reconciled.

In order to grasp what is happening in the Middle East, we must set aside a number of deep-rooted prejudices. First among them is the assumption that democracy presupposes secularization: The democratization movement in the Arab world came precisely after thirty years of what has been called the "return of the sacred," an obvious process of re-Islamization of everyday life, coupled with the rise of Islamist parties. The second is the idea that a democrat must also, by definition, be a liberal. There was no flowering of "liberal Islam" preceding the spread of democratic ideas in the Middle East. There are a few reformist religious thinkers who are lauded here and there in the West, but none has ever had much popular appeal in any Arab country. Conversely, many staunch secularists, in Tunisia for instance, are not democrats. They would like to repress Islamists much as the Algerian secularist intellectuals known as *les éradicateurs* did during their own country's civil war in the 1990s. Moreover, fundamentalist religious actors such as the Islamists of Tunisia or even the Salafists of Egypt, could become reluctant agents of a form of specifically *political* secularization that should in no way be confused with a secularization of society.

The history of the West does not contradict these theses. Religious tolerance was not the fruit of liberalism and the Enlightenment. Rather, it was the product of grudging truces in savage wars of religion, from the Peace of Augsburg in 1555 to the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648. Politics played a bigger role than philosophy or theology. The greatest Western religious reformer, Martin Luther, was far from a model of democracy, tolerance, or liberalism (to say nothing of his anti-Semitism). The link between Protestantism and democratization is not a matter of theological propositions, but of complex political and social processes. The Founding

Fathers of the United States were not secularists; for them, the separation of church and state was a way of protecting religion from government, not the reverse. The French Third Republic was established in 1871 by a predominantly conservative, Catholic, and monarchist parliament that had just crushed the Paris Commune. Christian democracy developed in Europe not because the Catholic Church wanted to promote secular values, but because that was the only way for it to maintain political influence. Finally, let us not forget that populist movements in Europe today align themselves with Christian democracy in calling for the continent's Christian identity to be inscribed in the EU constitution, but few would see this expression of "identity politics" as an omen of Europe's re-Christianization. All the talk of "Islamic identity" in the wake of the Arab Spring does not mean that mosques will henceforth become more crowded. Religious identity and faith are two different (and possibly opposed) concepts in politics. Identity might be a way to bury faith beneath secular politics.

The Islamists as well as the Salafists are entering into a political space formatted by certain constraints. These constraints will not only limit their supposed "hidden agenda" of establishing an Islamic state, but will push them toward a more open and democratic way of governance, because therein lies their only chance to remain at the center of political life. Thus the Islamists, and even the Salafists, will become reluctant agents of democratization.

A World of Change

The first of these constraints has to do with demographics. As Philippe Fargues has shown, there has been a dramatic decline in fertility across the Arab world.[1] In Tunisia, it has been below the French rate since the year 2000. Women have entered universities and the job market. Young people obtain more schooling than their parents did and marry later. Husbands and wives are more often closer to each other in age and level of education. They have fewer children, with nuclear families replacing extended households. Mobile phones, satellite television, and the Internet have allowed the newer generations to associate, connect, and debate on a "peer-to-peer" basis rather than through a top-down, authoritarian system of knowledge transmission. The young feel less strongly bound to patriarchal customs and institutions that have been unable to cope with the challenges facing contemporary Middle Eastern societies.

Flowing from these changes in demographics have been changes in political culture. The young are more individualistic and less prone to feel the pull of holistic ideologies, whether Islamist or nationalist. Along with the decline of the patriarchal model has gone a drop in the appeal of charismatic leaders. The failure of political Islam that I pointed to twenty years ago is now obvious.[2] This does not mean that Islamist parties are absent from the political playing field—quite the contrary. But

their utopian conception of an "Islamic state" has lost credibility. Islamist ideology is now finding itself challenged both by calls for democracy that reject any monopoly claim on power by a single party or ideology, and by neofundamentalist Salafists who declare that only a strict personal return to the true tenets of religious practice can serve as the basis of an "Islamic society." Even among the Muslim Brothers, young members reject blind obedience to the leadership. The new generation calls for debate, freedom, democracy, and good governance.

The appeal of democracy is not a consequence of the export of the concept of Western democracy, as fancied by supporters of the U.S. military intervention in Iraq. It is the political consequence of social and cultural changes in Arab societies (though these changes, of course, are part of the globalization process). It is precisely because the Arab Spring is a succession of indigenous upheavals, centered on particular nation-states and delinked from Western encroachments, that democracy is seen as both acceptable and desirable. This is why the ritual denunciations of imperialism—including the usual condemnations decrying Zionism as the source of all the Arab world's troubles—were so remarkably absent from the demonstrations. This also explains why al-Qaeda is out of the picture: The uprooted global jihadist is no longer a model for young activists and fails to find many takers when he seeks to enlist local militants for the global cause (al-Qaeda has been expelled from Iraq by local fighters). The only exceptions are places on the geographic fringes of the Arab world such as Somalia, Yemen, and the Sahel. Al-Qaeda, in short, is yesterday's news, part and parcel of the old anti-imperialist political culture that the Arab Middle East is now leaving behind.

Of course, the social changes are not completely linear and are not necessarily giving rise to a "democratic mind." Their effect is felt earliest, most widely, and most intensely in the big cities and among educated young people with access to the Internet. Others may feel excluded, including villagers in the Egyptian countryside, jobless urbanites in southern Tunisia, shopkeepers and merchants who fear that political tumult will hurt business, conservative milieus upset by what they see as sexual promiscuity among the demonstrators, and so on.

In a word, the Arab Spring masked large reservoirs of underlying conservatism in Arab societies. But even some of the more conservative corners of society are becoming part of the process of individualization. A remarkable field study shows how villagers in Egypt ignored the Muslim Brothers during recent elections because the Brotherhood came across as too monolithic and centralized.[3] These conservative religious voters preferred the Salafists on the grounds of what was seen as their greater *political* openness. The Salafist al-Nur Party's recent (albeit passing) endorsement of the presidential candidacy of former Muslim Brother Abdel Moneim Abul Futuh (who counts as a liberal in the Egyptian context) suggests that these villagers may have been onto something.

Change is affecting religion, too. The Salafists, like neofundamental-ists the world over, are recasting religion as a code and a set of clear-cut norms disconnected from tradition and culture. They are thus best understood not as part of a traditionalist backlash, but as bearers of an attempt to adapt Islam to modernity and globalization.[4] Of course, this adaptation should not be thought of in terms of theology (the proposi-tional content of this or that religion), but rather in terms of religiosity (the way the adherent experiences his or her faith). The wave of re-Islamization hides a very important fact: It has contributed to the diver-sification and the individualization of the religious field.

Islam as a theological corpus has not changed, but *religiosity* has. And this religiosity, liberal or not, is compatible with democratization because it delinks personal faith from traditions, collective identity, and external authority. The usual religious authorities (*ulama* and Islamist leaders) have largely lost their legitimacy amid the rise of self-appointed and often self-taught religious entrepreneurs. Young "born-again" Mus-lims have found their own way by surfing the Internet or joining local peer groups. They have criticized the cultural Islam of their parents and have tried to construct their own brand of Islam, one that feels more like a matter of conviction and less like an inherited habit. Religion has become more and more a matter of personal choice, whether that choice be the strict Salafist approach to Islam or some sort of syncretism, to say nothing of conversion to another religion.[5]

Fundamentalism and Secularism: The Secret Sharers

This individualization and diversification have had the unexpected consequence of disconnecting religion from daily politics, of bringing religion back into the private sphere and excluding it from that of gov-ernment management. Fundamentalism, by disconnecting religion from culture and by defining a faith community through believing and not just belonging, is in fact contributing to the secularization of society.[6]

One of the things this means is that an apparent rejection of secular-ization and democracy may nevertheless express "democracy-compati-ble" patterns: individualization, refusal of blind obedience, separation of faith from collective identity, and a certain distance from day-to-day politics. In such a context, any endeavor to restore traditional norms through laws and regulations will fail. After all, you cannot change a society by decree. In Saudi Arabia, the official imposition of *shari'a* on the rapidly increasing number of "emancipated" women among the middle and upper classes is leading to unbearable tensions. In Iran, all indicators suggest that society has become more modern and secular under the mullahs. Although a law adopted after 1979 allows girls as young as nine to be taken as brides, the average age at which Iranian women marry has continued to rise and now stands at about 25. In short,

even when *shari'a* is theoretically implemented, we are not seeing a return to a traditional society.

As we have seen, the Islamists enjoy no religious monopoly in the public sphere. There are other movements, such as the Sufis and the Salafists. This diversification is the consequence of thirty years of "re-Islamization." Religion's centrality in everyday life, coupled with the individualization of religiosity, has given birth to a variety of religious movements. Some have had the encouragement of regimes eager to dilute the Muslim Brotherhood's appeal. Together, their presence contributes to a willy-nilly democratization of the religious field. An unexpected result of the Arab Spring has been that Cairo's al-Azhar Mosque, one of Egypt's most important religious institutions, has found a new legitimacy. The imam there, Sheikh Ahmed el-Tayeb, a conformist appointee of former president Hosni Mubarak, has suddenly become an advocate of human rights, liberty, and the separation of religious institutions from the state. In Tunisia, Ennahda reached power only to discover that it does not control and indeed does not even know the hundreds of young imams who have taken over mosques abandoned by discredited clerics who had held their jobs courtesy of the old Ben Ali regime.

In Egypt, the Muslim Brothers have been upset to learn that their six decades of steady religious and social activism have not been enough to stop Salafist newcomers from successfully challenging the Brotherhood's primacy. As a further twist, the Egyptian Salafists have been challenging the Brothers from the left by allying themselves with Brotherhood dissidents. (In Tunisia, the Salafists have lined up on Ennahda's right by opposing democracy and demanding immediate implementation of *shari'a*.) Among other things, this is a sign that 2011 was not 1979 all over again—unlike the Ayatollah Khomeini's Islamic Republic of Iran, Egypt and Tunisia are not places where some single source (the Muslim Brotherhood or Ennahda) can assert a right "to say what Islam says." The religious arena, too, has become pluralistic and open to democratic pressure, even if, for the faithful, there are some elements that remain nonnegotiable.

That said, there is no agreement among religious political actors over what is and is not negotiable beyond the centrality of Islam. Should there be a body that determines whether laws are sufficiently conformable to Islam? If so, who ought to be nominated to it and by whom? Should *hudud* (corporal punishment) be applied in cases where religious laws have been violated? Is conversion to Christianity possible for a Muslim? It is on the question of the definition of religious liberty that we can expect the most vigorous debates. If the Muslim Brotherhood presents itself as the protector of the rights of the minority Coptic Christians in Egypt to practice their religion, is it ready to make religious freedom an *individual* human right (abandoning the concept of apostasy in the process) rather than merely the collective right of a particular historic

minority? The debate has already started. Abdel Moneim Abul Futuh, the Brotherhood dissident turned presidential candidate and surprising recipient of Salafist support, has declared that "nobody should interfere if a Christian decides to convert to Islam or a Muslim decides to leave Islam and become a Christian."[7]

Whenever the implementation of Islamic religious norms comes up for discussion, there is an internal debate in the institutions concerned. Democratization has affected the community of believers, too. The Salafists will certainly try to raise the stakes over *shari'a* and make the Muslim Brotherhood face up to the contradictions of its position. But they have also leapt into the political realm, forming parties of their own despite having previously challenged the very idea of political parties in the name of Islam. In their case, this is the compliment that vice pays to virtue: The Salafists know that without a parliamentary presence, they would lose their influence.

All the same, the Salafists have no program other than imposing *shari'a,* and thus are anything but a party of government, as the most realistic among them well know. The Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafists are fated to be rivals, and so one cannot rule out the possibility of their entering into unexpected alliances with other political forces.

The Failure of Political Islam

Islamists have changed, or at least they have understood that the world has changed. Even where they have taken control, as in Iran or Gaza, they have been unable to establish a successful model of an Islamic state. The gains that they have made in the wake of the Arab political openings are premised upon previous successes won by "others" (in Egypt and Tunisia, democratic secularists). In earlier cases, the "others" have been nationalists. In Gaza, it was Palestinian nationalism, not political Islam, that brought Hamas (the local wing of the Muslim Brotherhood) to power. Much the same is true for Lebanon's Hezbollah, which has built its success on its opposition to Israel and its ability to position itself as the champion of the country's large but traditionally underprivileged Shia community.

When Islamists went to jail, they rubbed elbows with secularists and human-rights advocates (such as Egypt's Saad Eddin Ibrahim). When they went into exile, it was more often to Europe than to Mecca. The Islamists came to understand the need to make alliances and to take into account other views. They tried to engage the West, but were too often rebuked. Calls for holy war and violent confrontation are the trademarks of countries or groups that are not friendly to these Islamists, and even consider them to be traitors: Iran or al-Qaeda. Implementation of *shari'a* is the official policy of regimes and movements with which they cannot identify, such as Saudi Arabia or the Taliban. Charitable work aside, the

Islamists social agenda has slowly faded away as their constituents have become ever more bourgeois and entrepreneurial. The aging of their leadership has put them at odds with the new generation of believers. There is a cultural gap between the Islamists and the younger generation that is less about Islam per se than about what it means for a person to be a believer.

All these changes are pointing toward the rise of what Asef Bayat calls "post-Islamism."[8] This does not mean that the Islamists have disappeared, but that their utopian ambitions have proved to be no match for existing social, political, and even geostrategic realities. There is, for instance, no blueprint of an "Islamic economy." Islamists are fairly status quo–friendly when it comes to economic affairs, content to run charities in poor neighborhoods but opposing strikes and approving the rescinding of land reform in Egypt. The wave of religious revival that has swept the Muslim world did not swell their ranks, but contributed on the contrary to the diversification of the religious field, transforming the Islamists into one set of religious actors among others.

Have the Islamists become "democrats"? They have long favored elections, recognizing that support for armed struggle serves jihadists like al-Qaeda on the one hand and repressive secular governments on the other, especially when the latter are eager to curry Western favor by posturing as the only bulwark against the "Islamist threat." Ennahda's leader Rachid al Ghannouchi has explicitly rejected the concept of an "Islamic state," and cites Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP) as a model of a post-Islamist religious-minded and conservative party.

Still, most Islamists are uneasy about sharing power with non-Islamic parties and turning their "brotherhood" organizations into modern political parties. They may, as in Morocco and Tunisia, give up formal support for *shari'a*, but they cannot define a concrete ruling program that goes beyond banning alcohol, promoting the veil, or pursuing other petty forms of "*shari'a*-fication." After the Arab Spring, which began outside Islamist ranks and took Islamist leaders by surprise, the Islamists must choose among options. Option 1 is the Turkish model as represented by the AKP. This would mean turning the "brotherhood" into a true modern political party; trying to attract voters from beyond a hard core of devout Muslims; recasting religious norms into vaguer conservative values (family, property, honesty, the work ethic); adopting a neoliberal approach to the economy; and endorsing the constitution, parliament, and regular elections.

Option 2 would be to ally themselves with "counterrevolutionary" forces (as in Egypt, for instance) out of fear that real democracy will prove too unpredictable and too hard to control. This choice would have large downsides, as Islamists would find themselves losing their remaining legitimacy, and might wind up becoming tools of the army. A modi-

fied form of this option would see Islamists siding with Salafists in a focus on certain high-profile issues (the veil and family law) while leaving other social and economic matters aside. Rather than ideological debate, it will most likely be the course of events itself that shapes what the Islamists do.

They are certainly neither secularists nor liberals, but they can be democrats. The convictions of political actors often play less of a role in shaping their policies than the constraints to which they are subject. The Islamists are entering an entirely new political space. Egypt and Tunisia did not have revolutions that replaced dictatorships with regimes that resembled their predecessors. There have been elections and there is a parliament. Political parties have been formed and, whatever the disappointments and fears of the secular left, it will be difficult simply to close down this new space, because what brought it into being in the first place—a savvy, connected young generation and a spirit of protest—is still there. And experience has shown that in the Middle East, when people are offered the opportunity to take part in free elections, they show up, even if threatened (as in Afghanistan and Iraq). Islamist movements throughout the region are constrained to operate in a democratic arena that they did not create and that has legitimacy in the eyes of the people.

Wary Voters

The Islamists must also listen to their voters, who will not follow them blindly. The "Islamic" electorate in Egypt or Tunisia today is not revolutionary; it is conservative. It wants order. It wants leaders who will kick-start the economy and affirm conventional religious values. It is not ready to plunge into reviving the caliphate or creating an Islamic republic. Ennahda and the Muslim Brotherhood know all this. They know that they need to attract voters because they have neither the desire nor the means to seize power by force. What is more, the protest movements in Egypt and Tunisia were not shaped by an all-encompassing ideology (as was the case in Iran in 1979) but by the ideals of democracy, pluralism, and good governance.

Iran's November 1979 election was held in the name of the Islamic Republic. The message was clear: This was an ideological revolution (even if there was disagreement about its complexion between the red of the Marxist-Leninists and the green of the Islamists). There is nothing of the kind in either Egypt or Tunisia. There is no revolutionary or ideological dynamic. It is significant, in this regard, that nowhere has the cult of the charismatic strongman reappeared. Instead, there are political parties and a new culture of debate that has influenced even the Islamists.

To impose an Islamist form of authoritarianism, the Islamists would need either control of the police and army or their own paramilitary forces, none of which they have. In Egypt and Tunisia, the army remains outside Islamist control (in Egypt, it may be outside anyone's control),

and is not identified with the former regime the way the Imperial Iranian Army was in 1979. Then too, neither Egypt nor Tunisia enjoys oil rents large enough to pay for placating the poor and sustaining loyal militias.[9] Elections will really matter, and their results can be expected to swing back and forth for the next decade or more. Although Islamists tend to adopt a populist profile (talking a lot about matters of "national identity," blaming Westernized elites), they may find themselves being outbid along these lines by demagogues who, if not "holier than thou," are nonetheless "more populist than thou" and better at making populist appeals.

There is one further set of constraints on both the Islamists and the Salafists, and these are geostrategic. Neither group has reached office on a platform of *jihad* or special support for the Palestinians. Unlike the Nasserite and Baathist revolutions or even Anwar Sadat's 1974 counter-revolution (when he opened Egypt's economy and swapped the Soviet for the U.S. embrace), the Arab Spring and Winter have not turned on international questions. Neither the Brotherhood nor the Salafists have ever articulated a coherent supranational agenda of mobilizing the *umma,* instead leaving attempts to politicize the concept of a transnational Islamic community in the bloody hands of al-Qaeda. The various branches of the Muslim Brothers (whether in Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, or Syria) as well as the Islamists of the Maghreb have always had their own national agendas and organizations; despite their ideological proximity, they have never been able to devise a regional common strategy. And recent events show how differently they may react: The Jordanian and Tunisian Islamists are far more open in their alliances and in their embrace of democracy than the Egyptians. The national and domestic scene is where the real action is. If supranational dynamics do make themselves felt, moreover, they will only push the Islamists to change their domestic agenda in the direction of more democracy and moderation.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict surely retains emotional significance, but no one is ready to endanger geopolitical stability and economic development for the sake of the Palestinian cause. The Islamists dislike Israel, and in this respect they are in step with Arab public opinion, but they are not willing to go to war. They have accepted the existing geostrategic constraints. The invitation that Tunisia's new and democratically elected government extended to Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh in January 2012 is in line with the one that Tunisia extended to the Palestine Liberation Organization after the Israelis took Beirut in 1982, and is evidence of continuity rather than rupture. The care that Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood has taken to open a dialogue with Western diplomats is another sign that it is accepting strategic realities. The Brotherhood wants to remodel the relationship between Egypt and Israel, but through negotiations, not confrontation. Economic constraints such as the lack of oil rents and the need to maintain tourism also drive the new governments

to want at least to appear moderate. There are projects to make tourism *halal* with gender-segregated beaches and alcohol-free resorts, but these seem like pipe dreams: Why should wealthy Saudis abandon Marbella or Beirut for a *halal* Sharm el-Sheikh that is just miles away from their own puritanically run five-star hotels?

The major conflict that is taking shape is not a clash between an Islamist-led Muslim world and the West. Rather, it is the one that pits the conservative Sunni Arab world (whether secular, Islamist, Wahhabi, or Salafist) against the "Shia crescent" of which Iran is the keystone. In the background is Saudi Arabia's discreet de facto alliance with Israel against the common Iranian threat. The crisis and fighting now raging in Syria are forcing regional actors to make unappetizing choices. Hezbollah is siding with Tehran and its client, the Assad regime in Syria. Hamas, though allied with Syria and Hezbollah, has reluctantly left Damascus for Cairo, returning to the fold of its old family, the Sunni Muslim Brothers. Turkey, having been evicted from the European dream, has turned from its dashed hopes of full EU membership to the task of carving out a new regional role for itself at the head of a Sunni alliance. The AKP leaders are well acquainted with the Arab Islamist leaders, and a new axis is taking shape, bringing together similar conservative Sunni parties. The Turkish connection is also a factor of moderation for the Islamist parties.

Of course this emerging Sunni axis antagonizes local minorities (Alevis in Turkey, Alawites in Syria), and accentuates tensions with the Shias in the Gulf (no support for the Bahraini demonstrators), in Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, and Iraq. Yet the isolation of Iran is also a step in favor of stabilization and moderation. An Israeli military strike against Iran's nuclear facilities will certainly trigger demonstrations in Casablanca, Cairo, and Tunis. But the Arab street will probably not mobilize against newly elected Arab governments, which will keep a lower profile than expected. Saudi Arabia, which cannot stand the concept of an Arab Spring, grows ever more estranged from the Islamist parties. The Saudis have played the Salafists against the Brothers, at least indirectly, but Saudis will not be able to find staunch and lasting allies among either Tunisia's hard-line Salafists or Egypt's milder variety.

The bottom line is that, for the first time since the early 1950s, the geostrategic situation of the Middle East neither dictates domestic agendas nor spurs the radicalization of domestic politics—both good omens for the process of democratization.

And What of Islam?

Whatever political ups and down lie ahead, whatever the diversity of national cases, and however intricate becomes the predictable fragmentation of both "democrats" and "Islamists" into various trends and parties, the main issue will be to redefine the role of Islam in politics.

The growing de facto autonomy of the religious arena from political and ideological control does not mean that secularism is necessarily gaining ground in terms of culture and society. Yet certainly a new form of *political* secularism is emerging. Once it takes hold, religion will not dictate what politics should be, but will itself be reduced to politics.

What is at stake is the reformulation of religion's place in the public sphere. There is broad agreement that constitutions should announce the "Muslim" identity of society and the state. Yet there is similar agreement on the proposition that *shari'a* is not an autonomous and complete system of law that can replace "secular" law. Instead, *shari'a* is becoming a loose and somewhat hazily defined "reference point" (except in the realm of personal law, which means that issues of women's rights will be at the core of the debate). As we saw, modern forms of religiosity tend to stress individual faith and choices over any sense of conformity to institutional Islam. Whatever descriptive truth was left in the old saying "Islam admits no separation between *din* and *dunya*" (that is, between religion and the world) has been definitively emptied out by the Arab Spring.

What we are seeing is not so much a secularization as a deconstruction of Islam. Is Islam a matter of cultural identity, meaning that one might even be an "atheist Muslim"? Is it a faith that can be shared only by born-again believers (Salafists) in the confines of self-conscious faith communities? Or is it a "horizon of meaning," where references to *shari'a* are more virtual than real? The recasting of religious norms into "values" helps also to promote an interfaith coalition of religious conservatives that could unite around some specific causes: opposition to same-sex marriage, for instance. It is interesting to see how, in Western Europe, secular populists stress the continent's Christian identity, while many Muslim conservatives try to forge an alliance with believers of other faiths to defend shared values. In doing so, many of them tend to adopt Protestant evangelical concerns, fighting abortion and Darwinism even though these issues have never been prominent in traditional Islamic debates.[10]

In this sense, the modern neofundamentalists are trying to recast Islam into a Western-compatible kind of religious conservatism. This has become obvious in Turkey. In 2004, when the AKP's Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan unsuccessfully tried to promote a legal ban on adultery, the crime was defined not in terms of *shari'a,* but rather by reference to the modern Western family (a monogamous marriage of a man and a woman with equal rights and duties). Interestingly, this made the traditional practice of polygamy, not infrequent among old-line AKP local cadres, a crime. As episodes such as these reveal, Islam is becoming part of the recasting of a religious global marketplace disconnected from local cultures.[11]

Instead of the secularization of society, we might do better to speak of the "autonomization" of politics from religion and of religion from poli-

tics, due to the diversification of the religious field and the inability to reconstruct religion as a political ideology. When religion is everywhere, it is nowhere. That was the underlying meaning that I took away from what Egyptian parliament speaker and Muslim Brother Saad al-Katatni said to a Salafist deputy who wanted to perform the Muslim prayer call while the house was in session: "We are all Muslims; if you want to pray there is a mosque in parliament, but parliament is not a mosque."[12] The paradox of re-Islamization is that it leads to political secularization and opens the door to debate about what Islam means. This could lead to the reopening of theological debate, but that would be a consequence and not a cause of the democratization of Muslim societies.

NOTES

1. Philippe Fargues, *Générations arabes: L'Alchimie du nombre* (Paris: Fayard, 2000).

2. Olivier Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam,* trans. Carol Volk (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994).

3. Yasmine Moataz Ahmed, "Who Do Egypt's Villagers Vote For? And Why?" *Egypt Independent,* 10 April 2012.

4. Olivier Roy, *Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

5. In Morocco and Algeria, there have been enough Christian conversions for a Protestant evangelical church to have sprung up among former Muslims. See Nadia Marzouki, "Conversion as Statelessness: A Study of Contemporary Algerian Conversions to Evangelical Christianity," *Middle East Law and Governance* 4, no. 1 (2012): 69–105.

6. Olivier Roy, *Holy Ignorance: When Religion and Culture Part Ways,* trans. Ros Schwartz (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

7. Noha El-Hennawy, "Islamist Presidential Candidate Declares Conversion Permissible," *Egypt Independent,* 16 May 2011.

8. Asef Bayat, "The Coming of a Post-Islamist Society," *Critique: Critical Middle East Studies* 9 (Fall 1996): 43–52.

9. There is a clear negative connection between the Arab Spring and oil rents. Governments without piles of petrodollars to spend must earn support the old-fashioned way—at the voting booth.

10. The works of the Turkish anti-Darwinist Adnan Oktar, who writes under the pen name Harun Yahya, have been widely distributed in the West since 2007. His *Atlas of Creation,* which he sent unsolicited to thousands of Western scholars and institutions, presents all the arguments and some iconography familiar from anti-Darwinist literature in the United States.

11. Olivier Roy, *Holy Ignorance.*

12. Ed Husain, "Egypt's Piety Contest," *The Arab Street,* 7 February 2012, *http://blogs.cfr.org/husain/2012/02/07/egypts-piety-contest.*