

Islamist-Leftist Cooperation in the Arab World

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Throughout the Middle East, actors across the political spectrum cooperate in ways that were unprecedented before the democratic openings of the early 1990s. Even though few of these openings have advanced toward democracy, groups that had never previously worked together—indeed, some with long histories as rivals—now routinely cooperate in a wide range of political activities. In addition to parliamentary opposition blocs, cooperation has emerged within professional associations, in the organization of protest activities, and within special bodies convened to debate constitutional amendments or draft national charters. Perhaps most strikingly, many Islamist groups now routinely cooperate with a range of leftists, including liberals, communists, and socialists. Repressive regimes remain the primary obstacle to democratic reform in the Arab world, but even strategic and limited openings have led to new forms of political contestation. Do these new practices hold long-term consequences for democratization in the region?

In order to address this question, we organized two conferences to explore Islamist-leftist cooperation in the Middle East.¹ Applying a typology of three forms of cooperation—tactical, strategic, and ideational—to three prominent cases of cross-ideological cooperation in the Middle East, we find a high degree of low-level cooperation and increased mid-level cooperation, but less evidence that high-level cooperation will emerge soon.

Levels of cooperation

The lowest level of cooperation is purely tactical: when groups engage in joint activities on an issue-by-issue and short-term basis. Cooperation might be repeated in the future, but only when actors embrace a common narrative—such as support for Palestinians—that entails few political costs. Tactical cooperation does not require (even if it sometimes facilitates) that groups seek to justify their cooperation in terms of their core ideological commitments.

Mid-level cooperation is more strategic and engagement is sustained and encompassing of multiple issues. Cooperation may be initiated around a particular set of aims but expanded as new issues arise. At the same time, strategic cooperation may be possible only with the understanding that certain issues are off the table: groups share a commitment to working together in a sustained manner, but not to forging a shared political vision or ideology.

High-level cooperation is when groups remain distinct entities but strive to develop a collective vision for political, social, and economic reform. Participants are open to exploring any issue that might arise, and ideological positions are decided through substantive debate about core ideological commitments. High-level cooperation also encompasses broader issues of identity, as participants claim a commitment to a shared worldview as well as specific policies about how to realize that vision.

The cases of Egypt, Jordan, and Yemen illustrate increasing levels of Islamist cooperation within different political contexts, as well as the continuing obstacles to high-level cooperation.

Islamist and Leftist movements have increasingly cooperated in a range of political activities. The authors compare the forms of such cooperation in Egypt, Jordan, and Yemen, illustrating the strategic importance of cross-ideological alliances for advancing agendas in the face of repressive regimes. However, the comparison also reveals that it remains uncertain if the alliances will gain enough strength to transform political landscapes, and unlikely that cooperation will forge a shared political vision or ideology.

Egypt

Egypt has a history of cooperation across ideological divides, but the parliamentary and presidential elections in 2005 brought massive cooperation across partisan, regional, and class lines calling for Mubarak's removal and the adoption of a new constitution. Political demonstrations reflected themes so common that the ideological commitments of specific organizers were often hard to discern in the midst of the events. However, though some

instances of high-level cooperation may be emerging, cooperation between Egypt's Islamists and leftists remains primarily tactical and strategic.

Within the Muslim Brotherhood, the new generation pressed for a means through which their banned organization could access a greater political voice in parliament. In 1984, it forged a tactical electoral alliance between the Brotherhood and the right-of-centre Wafd Party, followed in 1987 by one with the Labour Party that continues to today. These alliances had a veneer of sustained cooperation, but they proved to be largely tactical. Indeed, the Brotherhood is accused of infiltrating—more than cooperating with—the Labour Party in order to Islamicize that group.

When Mubarak closed the political system in the early 1990s in response to the resurgence of violence by Islamic militants, leaders across the political spectrum jointly opposed the strict new electoral laws, the termination of local mayoral and university elections, and greater press censorship. As in other states, political opposition found new spaces in which to operate. The Brotherhood soon commanded the majority of seats in the boards of directors of numerous professional associations but also organized demonstrations around issues of broader political concern attracting activists of all political stripes.²

The latter half of the 1990s witnessed leftist civil society organizations collaborating on a sporadic basis at the grassroots level. With the outbreak of the second Palestinian intifada in September 2000, this coopera-

tion drew in Islamic activists, as well as large segments of the general public. Demonstrations and rallies increased with the Iraq war, culminating in a massive demonstration in Cairo on 20 March 2003. This new mood of activism in Egypt has led to the creation of a network of joint initiatives, raising the question whether the Brotherhood is moving toward more consistently strategic cooperation. This upsurge in joint activism includes the Anti-Globalization Egyptian Group, formed in 2002 and joined by Islamists in 2003, and the dissent movement known as Kifaya (Enough), the brainchild of seven friends with Islamist, Marxist, Nasserist, and liberal backgrounds. But participants avoid controversial topics for the sake of unity, and cooperation has not reached a high level.

The number and diversity of cross-ideological organizations, forums, and blocs represents a deep and growing frustration with Egypt's status quo across the entire political spectrum.³ In 2005, the Wasat Party, Kifaya Party, the Karama Party (a break-away group from the Nasserists), and several nationalist opposition parties announced the formation of the National Front for Change, pledging to coordinate which parliamentary

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candidates would run against NDP candidates in the fall contest. For its part, the Brotherhood's participation in joint activities remains primarily at the low and middle levels, though the group does regularly reach out to other parties. It joined the National Front for Change in 2005 in spirit only, stating that it would not coordinate candidates or political slogans. Indeed, like many political actors, the Brotherhood attempts to play all sides by maintaining cooperative relations with the regime while also reaching out to opposition groups and candidates at other moments.

Jordan

Jordan's Muslim Brotherhood has increasingly cooperated with leftists since the 1989 political opening that brought the resumption of national elections and the lifting of martial law the following year. Tactical cooperation first emerged in the course of political protests, notably the massive popular events against the Gulf War of 1990-91. By 1992, leaders from the new Islamic Action Front (IAF)—a political party dominated by Brotherhood members—were holding press conferences alongside leftist leaders to protest changes to the elections law. When a new electoral law produced losses in the 1993 parliamentary elections for Islamist and leftist parties alike, they began to hold irregular meetings of an informal opposition bloc.

By the signing of the Jordan peace treaty with Israel in late 1994, Jordan saw a precipitous decline in political freedoms as the regime sought to silence widespread opposition to the treaty. Ironically, the closing of the political system led diverse political actors to cooperate more frequently on a wider range of activities. These engagements remained largely tactical in character and were organized around broad issues such as opposition to U.S. intervention in the Middle East.

A more sustained form of cooperation among 13 parties emerged with the creation of the Higher Committee for the Coordination of National Opposition Parties (HCCNOP) under the leadership of the IAF in 1994 as an extra-parliamentary coalition.⁴ Over its twelve-year history, the group's agenda has expanded beyond foreign policy to critique the regime's authoritarian practices. Former IAF leader Abd al-Latif Arabiyat has called the HCCNOP a democratic model for the Arab world.

Like Egypt, Jordan has also seen new alliances evolve into the formation of entirely new groups. The 2003 elections included candidates from Jordan's own al-Wasat. Like its Egyptian namesake—the two have no formal relations—the new Party unites moderate Islamists with leftists intent on presenting a new vision of pluralist reform. The Party (while licensed) remains very small and holds only two seats in parliament.

Jordan's Brotherhood and the IAF have been at the forefront of the trend toward cooperation in the kingdom. In addition to parliamentary blocs and various anti-normalization committees, Islamists have engaged in less visible local cooperative activities. The overall trend has been an evolution from purely tactical cooperation to the normalization of sustained, strategic cooperation. Nevertheless, Islamists draw red lines around issues on which they refuse to cooperate or compromise, particularly issues concerning gender and the application of Islamic law. Relations between the parties are periodically strained as the IAF continues to seek its previously privileged relationship with the regime.

Yemen

In Yemen, the mainstream Islamist political party—the Yemeni Congregation for Reform, or Islah (reform) party—is a coalition of moderate and radical Islamists, conservative tribal leaders, and businessmen. Because it is characterized by deep divisions—for example, the Party formally accepts democracy as a legitimate form of government while one Party leader, the extremist Abd al-Majid al-Zindani, routinely rejects it—the sustainability of the Party's cooperative endeavors has been uneven. Its factions share only a vision of conservative Islam as a necessary centerpiece to all spheres of life, with significant differences on what that would look like and how to achieve it. Indeed, Yemen illustrates that individual personalities play a crucial role in forging cooperation and the very real challenges of bringing together parties of different ideologies, strategies, and relations with the regime.

Following Yemen's 1990 unification, the new Islah Party was closely allied with the General Popular Conference (GPC). This alliance was easily forged around long and close relations between the regime and various factions within the Islah Party, with the latter playing a crucial role in helping to offset the potential gains of the Yemen Socialist Party (YSP) in the unified state's first parliamentary elections in 1993. In the years between unification and that first electoral contest, some two

hundred YSP members were targets of assassinations, many of which were carried out by Islamists connected to the more radical factions within the Islah Party.

Yet a decade later, a prominent YSP leader was invited as an honoured guest to address the biennial gathering of the Islah Party general membership. This dramatic turnaround—from a party bent on defeating the YSP to the exploration of limited cooperation—reflects less the shifting commitments of the Islah Party than the deterioration of its alliance with the GPC. With the defeat of the YSP in Yemen's civil war in 1994, the logic of GPC-Islah cooperation was diminished: the GPC, which dominated the government, no longer needed the Islah Party to help offset the potential influence of the YSP.⁵ Within three years, the ministries held by Islah declined from nine to zero.

In this context of near total domination of Yemeni politics by the GPC, the logic of sustained strategic cooperation between Islah and the other opposition parties became increasingly hard to ignore. In 2002, several moderate Islah leaders from the Brotherhood trend sought to forge an alliance with the YSP largely concerning the upcoming elections but with clear intentions that the alliance could continue. The deputy secretary-general of the YSP, Jar Allah Umar, addressed the Islah general conference in December 2002. As he exited the stage, he was fatally shot by a radical salafi seated in the second row, an area usually reserved for dignitaries.⁶ The Islah Party issued a statement condemning the act, although it remains unclear whether the assassin, Ali Jar Allah, was a member of Islah.

Nevertheless, the Islah party, the YSP, and four smaller parties formed the tactical Joint Meeting Group in preparation for the 2003 elections. Islah promised to withhold from running candidates in 30 districts where the YSP's prospects were better, and the YSP agreed not to campaign in 130 constituencies where Islah stood a good chance.⁷

Yemen illustrates that even when the logic of cooperation is compelling, the divergent ideological commitments of the actors involved might render cooperation unimaginable for some actors. The factionalized Islah party moved from strategic cooperation with the GPC toward tactical and strategic cooperation with the YSP and other leftist parties. Not all Islah members or even leaders embraced this move, illustrating the key role individuals play in forging cross-ideological cooperation and gaining the support of the broader party membership.

Democratic practice in action?

Do these new practices of cross-ideological cooperation hold long-term consequences for democratization in the region? Egypt, Jordan and Yemen illustrate that Islamist-leftist cooperation in the Arab world continues to expand, even as democratic openings are steadily reversed. While most cooperation remains short-term and tactical, instances of sustained and strategic cooperation are increasing. Cooperation emerges primarily when political opportunities render it useful, as when opposition parties develop a sense of common purpose in the face of a repressive regime. Even sustained cooperation, however, does not foreclose the possibilities that individual parties will still seek to cooperate with the regime to advance their own agendas. Mid-level cooperation does not necessarily reflect a growing commitment to democratic norms, but the ease with which many Islamists now cooperate with leftists suggests that high-level cooperation may emerge in the near future. In the meantime, however, the very limited cases of high-level, ideational cooperation appear to emerge primarily when new groups are formed out of splintering of parties, rather as a result of a broader evolution of established parties.

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Notes

1. The first conference was held at the European University Institute and Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies Mediterranean Programme, Florence, March 2004; the second at the Rockefeller Foundation Conference Centre in Bellagio, August 2005.
2. Mona al-Ghobashy, "The Metamorphosis of the Egyptian Muslim Brothers," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 37, no. 3 (August 2005): 373-395.
3. Samer Shehata, "Opposition Politics in Egypt: A Fleeting Moment of Opportunity?" *Arab Reform Bulletin* 2, no. 9 (October 2004).
4. See Janine A. Clark, "The Conditions of Islamist Moderation: Unpacking Cross-Ideological Cooperation in Jordan," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* (forthcoming November, 2006).
5. Jillian Schwedler, *Faith in Moderation: Islamist Parties in Jordan and Yemen* (Cambridge, 2006).
6. Sheila Carapico, Lisa Wedeen, and Anna Wuerth, "The Death and Life of Jarallah Omar," *Middle East Report Online*, 31 December 2002.
7. Sheila Carapico, "How Yemen's Ruling Party Secured an Electoral Landslide," *Middle East Report Online*, 16 May 2003.