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## Debate

# ARAB DEMOCRACY OR ISLAMIST REVOLUTION?

*Hillel Fradkin*

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In his essay on “The Transformation of the Arab World” in the July 2012 issue of the *Journal of Democracy*, Olivier Roy offers a comprehensive interpretation of the “Arab Spring” and its potential for leading to democracy. On the whole, he presents a benign view of where things will wind up, though with some caveats from the perspective of Western liberal democracy. The new Arab regimes, he suggests, will indeed be democratic but not necessarily secular or liberal. Nevertheless, he argues that there will be a trend toward a kind of secularization—a “political secularization” of the role of religion. Though this will not yield a simply liberal order, its effects might be regarded as quasi-liberal insofar as the political agenda will not be driven by a monolithic religious one: “Religion will not dictate what politics should be, but will itself be reduced to politics.”

This, obviously, is a crucial assertion. Although the Arab revolts were launched by demonstrators “calling for dignity, elections, democracy, good governance, and human rights”—what one might reasonably call a secular, liberal, democratic agenda—the protesters were not the primary beneficiaries of the elections that ensued. Indeed, as Roy fairly observes, they did not even try to win these elections: “They merely wanted to establish a new political scene.” Instead, the electoral beneficiaries, especially in Egypt, were Islamist parties. But these parties are bearers of the tradition of Islamism and its core project of building an Islamic state in which religion will indeed, to use Roy's words, “dictate what politics should be.” Hence it seems fair to ask whether the future may hold not democratization, but rather a process in which the Islamists pursue “their supposed ‘hidden agenda’ of establishing an Islamic state” and achieve their goal.

Roy's answer to this question is an emphatic no. Islamists have been "unable to establish a successful model of an Islamic state." Moreover, "their utopian ambitions have proved to be no match for existing social, political, and even geostrategic realities." As Roy reminds us, he first pointed out "the failure of political Islam" some twenty years ago. But such consistency masks a difference and even a contradiction. Two decades ago, his grounds for proclaiming political Islam a failure were its inability to take power anywhere and an expectation that it never would. But now it emphatically has taken power—at least formally—in the largest and most consequential Arab state.

The paradox is apparently resolved by the view that the Islamists' "utopian conception of an 'Islamic state' has lost credibility." As "utopian," it was doomed anyway. But questions arise: In the eyes of whom, precisely, has the Islamic state lost credibility—in those of the Muslim Brothers, whose political success has now reached its highest point ever since their founding in 1928? Have the Brothers abandoned the historic vision of their founder Hassan al-Banna? Or, if they still cling to that vision, will they indeed be compelled to forsake it by constraints built into the new political scene brought about by the Arab upheavals? What will be the result of the interaction between their ambitions and necessity?

Roy's view can be summed up in his conclusion that "something irreversible" occurred amid those upheavals: "We are witnessing the beginning of a process by which democratization is becoming rooted in Arab societies." In defense of this thesis, Roy offers a number of arguments, both political and sociological. Both sets of arguments are interesting, but both are also exposed to grave doubts and difficulties.

### **The Political Argument**

Though Roy relies somewhat more heavily on sociological arguments, it is appropriate here to begin with the political side and to focus on the case of Egypt and its Muslim Brotherhood. There are a number of reasons for this: The controversy over the character and prospects of "Arab democracy" remains primarily a political question; the Islamist project, with its goal of an "Islamic state," has always displayed an overarching concern with politics; and Egypt will provide the most immediate and crucial test of whether that project can be realized.

Roy's argument is threefold. First, the circumstances in which the Brotherhood and other Islamist groups such as the Salafists have reached power have also put them "into a political space formatted by certain constraints." Second, the Islamists are aware of this situation and they have bent or will bend to it: "Islamists have changed, or at least they have understood that the world has changed." They know that in behaving accordingly "lies their only chance to remain at the center of political life." Third and finally, if they do not "accept the demands of

the democratization process . . . they will find themselves sidelined.” So whether the Islamists cooperate or not, democratization will triumph.

All this may eventually prove true. At the moment, however, the political evidence tends strongly in a different direction. Certainly the Brotherhood has found obstacles in its way and encountered constraints upon the effectuation of its will. But so far it has also shown remarkable skill in overcoming them and in achieving political success.

Like many others, Roy expected one of the strongest constraints to be the army; another was supposed to be discontent with the leadership among younger Brothers; yet another constraint would be imposed by actual Brotherhood defectors who, by forming alliances with other political forces (both Islamist and secularist), might obstruct the Brotherhood in the presidential elections.

For months, things seemed to be tending that way. The Brotherhood won the parliamentary elections in late 2011 and early 2012 and was thereby enabled to dominate the constituent assembly tasked with writing a new constitution. But Egypt’s courts overturned these achievements, dissolving both the parliament and the constituent assembly. On the eve of the June 2012 presidential election won by the Brotherhood’s Mohamed Morsi, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) drained the presidency of its powers through “supplementary constitutional decrees,” and assigned to itself not only executive powers but full legislative ones as well.

Earlier in the presidential campaign, the Brotherhood’s most charismatic presidential candidate, Khairat al-Shater, had been blocked from running. His replacement Morsi—an engineering professor whom many dismissed as the “spare tire”—faced a tough campaign. Morsi won, but only narrowly. Many thought that his popular support was thin, and he appeared to confirm this by weak and solicitous gestures on the morrow of his victory. According to a common view, the military had succeeded in effecting a *de facto* “coup.” Field Marshal Mohamed Hussein Tantawi, the head of the SCAF, boasted that “Egypt will never fall. It belongs to all Egyptians and not to a certain group . . . the armed forces will not allow it . . . The armed forces will not allow anyone, especially those pushed from the outside, to distract it from its role as the protector of Egypt.”

The Muslim Brotherhood seemed to have little power in the new “political scene.” Moreover, it seemed as if it was being set up to bear the blame for all of Egypt’s many problems. Down the road, then, its power might fade still further.

Yet within six weeks, Morsi managed to decapitate the SCAF and to bring the army to heel by the wholesale appointments of new senior officers. At the same time, the SCAF decrees that had been meant to cripple Morsi and the Brotherhood were turned around in their favor. In the absence of parliament, Morsi acquired all legislative power. Since then, he has used it and other powers of the presidency to fill offices in

crucial ministries largely with appointees allied to his own views. The Brotherhood thus seems to have staged its own coup.

Roy's analysis of how the Egyptian political dynamic would unfold was written before the Brotherhood's defeat of the army, so it would be unjust to complain that he had failed to take it into account. Moreover, the end of this political story is far from being written.

But it is not unfair to ask whether the general view that Roy takes of the "political scene" or "political space" was on the face of it suspect. Roy asserts that "the convictions of political actors often play less of a role in shaping their policies than the constraints to which they are subject." This may well be true of a normal political environment in which well-established constitutional and other factors place limits on political action. But it is frequently *not* true of revolutionary situations (although of course some constraints operate there too). According to Roy, however, this is an irrelevant consideration, for "there is no revolutionary or ideological dynamic" in Egypt (as there was, for example, in Iran in 1979), other than perhaps the revolutionary dynamic that created the new "political space." "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." These are the real revolutionaries, and the Brotherhood folk, who anyway have abandoned their utopian ambitions, will be forced to operate within the democratic parameters established by the youthful protestors.

It now appears, however, that there is indeed a "revolutionary dynamic" beyond that inaugurated by the earliest demonstrations, and for the moment at least, the Brotherhood is driving it. If that was not simply predictable, it is surely not unprecedented in the record of modern revolutions since the French Revolution, where moderate beginnings yielded to the success of more radical forces. Nor was it ever simply true, as Roy suggests, that the Brotherhood did not play a large and perhaps even decisive role in the anti-Mubarak revolution. It is true that the Muslim Brothers were largely absent from the streets in the first week, perhaps due to habits of caution bred by long years of government suppression. But the Brotherhood rather quickly brought its large cadres to bear in the February 2011 protests that led to Mubarak's fall. It is unlikely that Mubarak would have been ousted without them.

In all events, the Brothers, like other revolutionaries, do not seem to have felt obliged simply to accept the new "political space" along with whatever constraints it might impose. Instead, the Brotherhood has sought to reshape this new space to its own advantage. As with past revolutionary shot-callers, the success of the Brotherhood's leaders will hinge on how well they understand the politically relevant terrain, how intelligent they are in exploiting it, and how much in the way of resources they can bring to bear. Thus far, they appear to be succeeding.

Top Brotherhood officials understood, as others did not, how weak

the army actually was. At the time of the “army coup,” the Brotherhood indicated that it was not accepting defeat. Jihad al-Haddad, a close advisor and spokesman for Khairat al-Shater, declared that the existing situation was a “chessboard.” Haddad also told a reporter that the Brotherhood had “always expected a long struggle to achieve power” and had been “planning for a 7- or 10-year process.”<sup>1</sup> Of course, the Brotherhood needed an appropriate occasion to act against the army. As it happened, it found that relatively quickly, in the form of a terrorist attack on a military base in Sinai. By that time, the Brotherhood had also taken the measure of the country’s other political forces, including secular ones, and understood that these too would have to support the Brothers’ counter coup.

But if Egypt is still in the midst of a revolutionary situation, it then becomes very important to give attention to “the convictions of political actors” (their ideological and revolutionary outlooks), and not just to “the constraints to which they are subject.” If Roy does not do so, it is because of his analytic premise, and certainly not because the Brotherhood’s agenda (as he somewhat snidely suggests) is merely “supposed” or “hidden.” It is neither, and Roy knows that.

### Shater Speaks

While the Brotherhood may try to keep hidden its tactics, we are quite well informed about its convictions. In addition to being able to study the movement’s long ideological tradition, we can directly consult the views of Khairat al-Shater, who is widely credited with being the mastermind of current Brotherhood strategy and operations. He offered them in a long April 2011 speech.<sup>2</sup> In this address, he made it clear that, for him at least, what Roy calls the “utopian conception of an ‘Islamic state’” had not lost its “credibility.” Moreover, Shater responded clearly if implicitly to the doubts, raised by Roy and others, about the abiding relevance of the Brotherhood’s vision and strategy. Due to the Brotherhood’s success to date, his remarks deserve very close attention.

Shater rejected root and branch any notion of seeking a new vision, spirit, or path. Rather, he insisted that the Brotherhood’s approach had been vindicated and undertook to restate and elaborate it for the present circumstances. He emphatically and explicitly reaffirmed Banna’s goal, which he described as

restoring Islam in its all-encompassing conception; subjugating people to God; instituting the religion of God; the Islamization of life, empowering of God’s religion; establishing the Nahda [Renaissance] of the Ummah [the global Muslim community] and its civilization on the basis of Islam.

With equal emphasis, he reaffirmed the wisdom of Banna’s “method” and its success—a success that Shater thought recent events had revealed

rather than contradicted. Banna's method was to "build" in progressive order, beginning from the "Muslim individual" and proceeding through the "Muslim family, the Muslim society, the Islamic government, the global Islamic State and [eventually] reaching the status of Ustathiya [preeminence or mastership] with that State." Shater saw that process, which had already done so much to transform Muslim society, as self-evidently entering its next phase, that of Islamic government, just as Banna had foreseen.

Similarly, the current success also vindicated the instrument that Banna had created to apply this method—namely, the Society of the Muslim Brothers—and its mode of organization and operation. This instrument was distinguished by the careful hierarchical organization of its various subgroups and the strict discipline exercised by its highest authorities, the Supreme Guide and the Guidance Bureau. As a result, the Brotherhood had been able to pursue its mission productively through many years of extreme oppression. No other group of Muslims was like it or had enjoyed similar success, no matter how pious or how devoted to the general goals of the Brotherhood these other groups might have been. This was why the Brotherhood was well prepared for the present opportunity.

All these things—mission, method, and organization—were "constants" and not "variables," as Shater was at pains to insist. The constants were not subject to change. Nor did they ever need to be, since they were derived from the highest and most successful model ever, "the Prophet's method" (as Shater called it) offered by Muhammad and his companions and early successors. By following this model, the Brotherhood had created individual members who were "a walking Quran; whose faith, worship, manners, relationships, behavior, thoughts and emotions were identical to the Islam that Muhammad received from God Almighty." So too had it adhered to the guidance of Umar ibn Al-Khattab, the second caliph, who had stated, said Shater, that "there is no religion without a [Society], no [Society] without an Imam, and no Imam without obedience." On this basis, Shater observed, Umar had been the architect of the greatest of the early Muslim conquests and of the global Islamic state that had endured for a thousand years. The Brotherhood's organization as a society—as *the* Society—and its discipline had followed Umar's model and, it was implied, might thus duplicate his success.

But what of the "variables" that Shater acknowledged? Were there new circumstances that might require new methods and policies in pursuit of what he termed "Brotherhood work," and that might introduce the element of "moderation" anticipated by Roy and others? Indeed there were, said Shater. The Brotherhood was responding to new circumstances, for instance by setting up a political party, the Freedom and Justice Party. The Brotherhood had never had a party before, and indeed Banna himself had opposed such a step on principle. But Shater emphasized that this and other possible innovations were entirely secondary. Political parties as such were of alien, Western origin and enjoyed no

particular sanctity. Indeed, as instruments of political conflict, Western-style parties violate the unity and harmony that are the goal of Muslim politics. If they turned out to be useful in present circumstances, fine; if not, they could and would be dispensed with.

But what of possible “dissent in the ranks,” especially among the younger Brothers? In his speech, Shater acknowledged the young and professed to understand their concerns and temptations. He cautioned them, however, to remember that they were inexperienced and that they were coming of age without benefit of the harsh experiences endured by men such as himself, who had spent much time in prison and suffered other great injustices. It was important for the Brotherhood youth to take the long view and in any event necessary in light of the principle of Brotherhood discipline. The Brotherhood could and did entertain debate about the “variables.” But such debate was resolved through its highest organs, and once decisions were taken, they were obligatory. That was a “constant.” And in fact, there have been very few defections among the young Brothers, despite the predictions of Roy and others.

Shater’s vision, as Roy says, is utopian and thus likely to fail sooner or later. But it surely makes a difference whether it is sooner or later, as we know from the histories of European utopian movements such as Communism and Nazism, or of Khomeini’s Islamic Republic of Iran. Roy sees the Iranian regime as on shaky ground, and indeed it is. The Islamic Republic now confronts internal ideological contradictions as well as public discontent, and it may be on the road to collapse. But it is still standing after more than thirty years. How long might the Egyptian revolution take to run its course, and with what consequences?

## The Sociological Argument

Roy’s sociological analysis may be taken in part as a response to these issues. He appears confident that democratization will put an end to revolution sooner rather than later. According to him, new forces are at work in Arab society that were presumptively lacking in Iran (a rather doubtful assertion) and that will be a more powerful barrier to the Islamist project than the political obstacles. In part, these are the result of the effects of modernization on Arab society (in this context, Roy cites the impact of modern university education on the young). But in part they are also the paradoxical result of the influence over the last thirty years of the Islamist project itself: the rebellion against modernity, the “return of the sacred,” and the “re-Islamization of everyday life.”

Modernization has undermined the “patriarchal model” and weakened the “top-down, authoritarian system of knowledge transmission,” especially for the young. As a result, the young are more individualistic and less susceptible to “the pull of holistic ideologies, whether Islamist or nationalist” and to “the appeal of charismatic leaders.”

The modernization story may appear to be contradicted by the “return of the sacred,” but the contradiction is only apparent. For the sacred has returned in the form not of a restoration of authoritative tradition but of a smorgasbord of religious movements competing for the adherence of the young. The result is an upsurge not of religion but of “religiosity.” The attachments that it generates are fundamentally an expression of individual preference, a kind of approximation of the individual conscience that led Christians and others to embrace religion within liberal societies. Young Arab Muslims are coming to resemble modern individuals, even if they are not aware of it. Politically speaking, this means that no uniform religious project can prevail: “Religion will not dictate what politics should be, but will itself be reduced to politics.”

The evidence for this conclusion is necessarily preliminary, but even as such, it is highly dubious. It has long been rightly observed that the Islamist movement tends to undermine much Muslim and “patriarchal” tradition: In this and in other ways it is “modern.” But it is also true that this break with tradition was from the beginning the intention and proud boast of the Islamist movement, with its appeal to the model of the Salaf as-Salah (the virtuous ancestors)—that is, the truly ancestral. Sociologically speaking, moreover, it has been clear over the past thirty years that many young people from the Muslim world (and often especially the educated among them) have embraced the Islamist movement as a refuge from the burdens of the modern individual rather than as a path to individual expression. Perhaps the Egyptian college students who are drawn to the Brotherhood and feel blessed by the services that it provides are suffering from what the Marxists used to call “false consciousness,” and a further unfolding of the sociological dialectic will yield the results that Roy predicts. But that remains to be seen.

Roy also appeals to the older and longer European experience in arriving at a settlement of the question of religion and politics, and in particular the emergence of religious tolerance as a principle of political life. According to Roy, “Religious tolerance was not the fruit of liberalism and the Enlightenment. Rather, it was the product of grudging truces in savage wars of religion. . . . Politics played a bigger role than philosophy or theology.” In this context, he invokes the Thirty Years’ War, the U.S. Founding, and other episodes in modern Western history, and suggests that there is an analogy between this experience and current trends in the Arab world.

But Roy’s account of the Western experience neglects certain crucial factors. It is of course true that the modern Western settlement of the question of religion and politics did not proceed directly from the realm of ideas to politics, but was mediated by grievous and bloody experience. But it is also true that, when this suffering produced openness to new views, the latter were available, precisely because the ground had been prepared by works of philosophy and theology. Moreover, the

new doctrines of religious tolerance made extensive use (perhaps disingenuously, but nonetheless successfully) of notions of “individual conscience” arising from Christian thought, an approach that is less readily available in a Muslim context. In any event, the only prominent protagonists of “theology” or political thought in the Arab Muslim world today are the Brotherhood and other Islamists. As Roy notes, “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.” Roy seems to think that this deficit will be made up by the absorption of modern notions that have gained global currency. Perhaps, but as in the past, this will require overcoming the objection—a very grave one in the Arab and Muslim worlds—that these notions are of alien origin.

Nor does Roy’s analogy with the history of the West have benign implications for Arab society in the short term. For if that analogy is accurate, it suggests that Arab society must first undergo an especially grievous period of religiopolitical conflict. The Islamist revolution, as it goes forward, may very well provide such conflict in ample measure. Roy apparently discounts this on the grounds that political Islam is a failure, that it can never establish the Islamic state, and that the impossibility of its aims will be speedily realized. But that is to take a rather serene view of revolutionary utopian politics. When Trotskyites and others attacked Soviet Communists for failing to meet the “communist ideal,” the Soviets offered “really existing communism” as their justification and carried on with their bloody seventy-year run in power. As Roy notes, the Salafists and other more extreme Islamists may attack the Brothers for not moving full speed ahead to create the “ideal” Islamic state. Yet the Brotherhood will certainly be able to respond that its project is a “work in progress.” Whether it can make that argument stick will depend on its political skill.

Of course, Arab society may well get a dose of religious politics so grievous and protracted that Arabs will eventually recoil toward the “democratization” that Roy forecasts. But that is hardly an appealing prospect for those currently living in Arab countries, or for peoples elsewhere who must deal with the international consequences of prolonged religious warfare in the Middle East.

—31 October 2012

## NOTES

1. Haddad’s “chessboard” quote is from David Kirkpatrick, “Egypt’s Military Softens Tone as Vote Count Favors Islamist,” *New York Times*, 18 June 2012. Haddad’s references to a “long struggle” taking seven to ten years are reported in David Kirkpatrick, “On Eve of Vote, Egypt’s Military Extends Its Power,” *New York Times*, 15 June 2012.

2. All Shater quotes are from “Translation: Khairat al-Shater on the Rise of the Muslim Brotherhood,” *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology* 13 (2012): 127–57. Available at [www.currenttrends.org/research/detail/khairat-al-shater-on-the-nahda-project-complete-translation](http://www.currenttrends.org/research/detail/khairat-al-shater-on-the-nahda-project-complete-translation).