

THE STRATEGY OF SUPPORTING MODERATE ISLAM: BACKGROUNDS AND LIMITS

‘Moderate Islam’ seems to be the password if you wish to *Enter* the database of Western strategy towards the ‘Arab Spring’ regime changes in the Middle East. A decade after Sept. 11, nine years after the US attack against the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq and roughly a decade of ‘moderate Islamist’ AKP government in Turkey, the key ally of the West in the region, ‘moderate Islam’ shapes up as the legitimate heir to the authoritarian secular dictatorships of the Arab world.

The revolutionary changes of the ‘Arab spring’ were brought by the powerful protest of the young and educated urban middle class of the Middle East. Those young generations’ modern strata have been well connected to the World Wide Web and its social networks, but their professional and civil potential is held back by the inertia and stagnation of decades-long authoritarian-nationalist regimes in the Arab world. Those regimes were also formed by young and modern-minded army officers, heading the anti-colonial movements of the 1950s-1960s. At the time, the fragile and tiny modern elites of the Arab countries could not rely upon serious public support from a deeply traditionalist Arab society: therefore, their modern nation-building effort degenerated mostly into personal dictatorships or ended up in more or less enlightened but conservative monarchies. Those regimes heavily stagnated with time and appeared as the major stumbling block against further efforts towards modernization and popular rule. Some dictators of the region committed big crimes (like the extermination of the city of Hama by Syria’s Hafez Assad in 1982 and the mass killing of Iraqi Kurds by poisonous gas by Saddam Hussein), in many different ways supporting movements for terrorism and de-stabilization of the Middle East. Internationally more responsible regimes like those in Egypt and Tunisia have performed as corrupt oligarchies preventing social change, political and economic modernization. This is the background of the young middle class revolt of the ‘Arab spring’.

The radicalization of the urban middle class proved sufficient to un-seat long standing autocrats like Hosni Mubarak of Egypt or Ben Ali of Tunisia, yet it failed to produce majorities to introduce modern liberal democracy in the second phase of regime change, where popular majorities brought to power mostly Islamist political movements. The present wave of Arab revolutionary modernization is stronger compared to the anti-colonial movements of the 20th century but still dependent upon vast majorities of traditional society in those countries. The clash between dictatorial regimes and liberal urban middle class brought to success a third party – political Islam. What could be expected next?

Political Islam is an old player on the Arab political scene. Leaving aside traditional theocracies like Saudi Arabia, the Arab secular regimes have mercilessly persecuted the Islamists of the Muslim Brotherhood, putting them in jail or even executing them.¹ Islamists were considered a reactionary force within the dominant paradigm of modern and secular Arab nationalism, which aimed at pro-Western path of development – even if enforced in a dictatorial manner. In a milder form, Arab nationalists repeated the lesson of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk – the father of modern Turkey: if you wish to modernize an Islamic society, you need

¹ The ideological leader of Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt Said Qutb was hanged in prison in late 60s, while all efforts of Islamist revolts in Syria or Iraq were suppressed by force.

to outlaw any presence of Islam in institutions of government and in public life. The regimes of Arab nationalism lost legitimacy as secular powers before giving up to the revolts of the angry young middle class. Political Islam regained the status of a powerful political alternative long before the wave of liberal democratic ‘Arab spring’ swept through the squares of Arab capital cities.

Political Islam gained its first victory with the revolution of 1979 in Iran. It was the first example of a society on a successful path of modernization to turn back to *sharia law*, enforced by the merciless ‘guards of Islamic revolution’. Was it a return to the past or a new dimension of the future? There was a temptation to consider the revolution in Iran as a specific phenomenon for the *shia* branch of Islam. Yet, political radicalization under the banner of Islam expanded rapidly throughout the Middle East. Islam-motivated warriors – *mujahideens* – were generously funded by Saudis and the West in order to fight the Soviet invaders of Afghanistan. The Soviets left the country 10 years later, but the Islamist warriors did not go back home – they developed and extended their networks aimed at radical *jihad* throughout the world of Islam. Islamic political-military movements developed in many countries and they have reshaped the political map of the Middle East fundamentally since the 1990s. The secular Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) faded under the competition of the *Hamas* Islamist movement fighting for Palestinian independence from Israel. The *Hezbollah* movement proved a long term major obstacle to reconciliation in Lebanon.

For less than two decades in the late 20th century both *status quo* powers of secular nationalism and the leftist radicals of PLO type had been replaced by resurgent Islam as a major ideological-political force. Political Islam represented a new state of unity within Muslim societies: peasants, intellectuals, youth organizations and business communities, Islamic *diaspora* in the West – all they adopted Islamic views as a background of their private and public identity. Affluent middle class youngsters proved tempted by radical Islam – some of them went to join the terrorist cells of suicidal warriors. What has generated this powerful swing from all sides of the political and ideological spectrum towards Islam?

The wave of political Islamization grew out of the disintegrated ideologies and culture of the modern world. In the course of 1950s-1980s the entire world view of Western modernity was rapidly changing into what is barely defined as ‘post-modernity’. The modern West constructed a hierarchy of culture based on the sole criterion of development. Starting from primitive savages and barbarians of ancient times, human development went through the stages of tribal community, traditional agricultural society, to reach its highest peak in the age of modernity. That was the staircase of **progress** and it implied a strong desire of people at lower stages to aim at the top, to move to the top, to change and develop towards the modern world. And they actually did. Anti-colonial movements were based on modern nationalist ideology, economic and political development in the Third World before and after de-colonization was targeted at the standards of the modern West. The major division line splitting post-colonial societies was the choice between a pro-Western and a pro-socialist/Soviet-style modernization strategy. Traditional identity was left in the past. Modern identity was the aim of liberation, nation-building and economic and social development.

The most important message within the value system of ‘post-modernity’ was the equality of cultures. Culture egalitarianism developed from the youth revolts of the 1960s and it destroyed the value of development from lower to superior levels of culture. Supremacy of modern culture was banned as an ideology of segregation. All cultures represented equal value. ‘Multiculturalism’ was created as an instrument of coexistence among different

cultures of equal value. What was the motivation left for the non-Western world then to opt for modernization and Western style development? Post-modern equality of cultures swiftly modified the optics of perceiving the West from the outer world. The modern West seized to be the model to follow and proved one of many equal cultural-civilizational paths of existence. After having served as a dominant template of development for 150 years, Western culture re-appeared as a threat in the eyes of many non-Western communities. It proved the bearer of consumer materialism, of decadent and 'shameless' sexual revolution, of youth rebellion against family and parents, and a vehicle of destruction of all 'natural values' of community. This non-Western view of the West signified the re-birth of traditional society and traditional identity in the non-Western world. The striving for modernity was killed by post-modernism. The vacuum of modernity left in the non-Western world was filled in with the return of traditional culture. Welcome to resurgent Islam (among many other identities of tradition).

The ideological shifts of Western culture were combined with the collapse of its Eastern modern alternative – the Soviet model. Both secular nationalists and radical leftists of the Islamic world lost their values' backgrounds and identity. Political Islam proved their common future. The resurgence of radical Islam, the tragedy of Sept. 11 and the terror acts which followed in Madrid and London have served as a wake up call and as an eye opener for the West about the real depth and potential of this powerful transformation of values, visions and identity in the world of Islam. This transformation involved also a radical shift in the self-awareness and the self-esteem of all Muslim societies. Two or three centuries of subordination to Western supremacy was replaced with an angry self-evaluation of Muslim superiority towards a 'sinful' and decadent West. Islamic revival and its public product – political Islam – proved a long-term wave, sweeping the remains of secular Arab nationalism and its path to modern development. It was necessary for the West to accommodate to those new realities in the world of Islam.

Having recognized that resurgent political Islam is here to stay, Western strategists decided to support and motivate the 'moderate' versions of Islamism to take over fundamentalism and radicalism in the Muslim world. The first step was made in support of moderate Islamist AK Party of Turkey, which won the elections in 2002 against the mainstream Kemalist – republican secular parties. The predecessor of AKP – the Islamist party of Premier Necmettin Erbakan – was removed from power with a decision made by the then powerful National Security Council (NSC), dominated by the army – the ultimate guard of republican secularism. That decision equaled to what was defined as a 'post-modern *coup d'etat*'. In comparable circumstances, similar judgments of the NSC after 2002 could remove from office the AKP Prime Minister Recep Erdogan. In fact, attempts to rule out AKP Islamists from power have been undertaken by the Army elite in the decade after 2002, but all of them failed. Turkey entered a new stage of development where moderate Islamism and its program for 'democratization' of the Turkish state were actively supported both by the European Union and the US.

Supporting Turkish moderate Islamism was an important test case for the Western strategy towards the Muslim world because throughout the 20th century Turkey had always been considered as a success story of modernization and as a valuable ally of the West since the beginning of the Cold War. A successful transformation of Turkey from authoritarian secular nationalism, guarded by the army, to a democratic state under moderate Islamist rule would pave a road to follow for its neighbors of the Greater Middle East. In fact, AKP-style 'democratization' proved a process of tactical offensive against the secular army elite with

Western support. After the high army command was removed from the political process, authoritarian control over state and society was swiftly rebuilt by the AKP Islamists. Systematic violations of the freedom of speech, abuse of the court system for political ends and rapid replacement of staff in the judiciary, the civil service and in security institutions took place: secular loyalists were replaced with Islamists.

Controlled introduction of Islamist parties to power also took place in Iraq as part of the US efforts to develop a new political system in the country after 2003. The fact that the dominant *shia* Islamists were heavily dependent upon their relationships with Tehran did not seem to bother too much the US authorities in Baghdad. The developed capacity of local Islamists to balance among different parties and interests and to compromise seemed a much more important target than weakening of their loyalties to the Ayatollahs of Iran.

Testing ‘moderate Islam’ continues with the Western endorsement of Islamist parties reaching dominant power positions through elections in the aftermath of the ‘Arab spring’ – in Tunisia, Egypt and – in the near future – in Libya. Islamism has to be moderated through testing the limits of its power in more or less pluralistic societies of the Middle East, where secular nationalists and liberal democrats may be defeated, but not dead. The international community (the EU in particular) has tolerated even the democratic process which brought to power the *Hamas* radicals in the Palestinian territories – primarily in the *Gaza* strip, even if very few signs of expected moderation by *Hamas* leadership have shown up since then.

Last but not least, governments and civil society of major Western European countries develop and implement long-term strategies to support ‘moderate Islam’ among their growing immigrant Muslim population. Berlin, Paris and London implement different approaches to the problem with very limited results so far.

Supporting ‘moderate Islamism’ is a strategy which might seem very reasonable and justifiable *vis-à-vis* the powerful process of Islamist resurgence in the global world. This strategy however has its serious limitations and internal controversies. It might also prove dangerous if considered as the unique and only instrument to deal with Islamism by the strategists of the Western world.

First, Western strategists consider the potential of ‘moderate Islam’ based on political criteria and concrete situations, overlooking the religious and cultural depth of Islam. What is the border between ‘moderate’ and radical Islam? Is it in the declarations of the Islamists themselves? They may change overnight when needed. In situations of no choice Western strategists have claimed the need to negotiate with ‘moderate *Taliban*’, even if the very concept of *Taliban* has served as an example of fanaticism and no moderation. Tactical judgments on the surface about ‘moderate Islamism’ may bring real disasters in longer-term perspective, if the true nature of particular Islamist movements and leaders is overlooked by Western strategy makers.

Second, Islamists are quite familiar with the Western scare of resurgent Islam and they are ready to play numerous games of marketing their own interest and strategic designs as part of ‘moderate Islamism’. After the terrorist acts in the London tube of 2005 the leaders of the Muslim community in Britain set off on a shameless campaign of extending their communal religious and cultural privileges under the guise of ‘supporting moderate Islam against radicals and terrorists’. What could such a support constitute in practical policies? Introduction of *sharia* law for the Muslims in Britain, extending Islamist propaganda in the

public space, compulsory Islamic education – those were only part of the agenda of those ‘moderates’. This agenda presumes no need for integration into the British society, shows no respect for the culture and tradition of the country which has welcome the Muslim immigrants and it cares only for the next niches of Islamist expansion on British soil. If this is the ‘moderation’ of Islam in the heart of Europe, guess where the limits of ‘moderate’ Islam might go in Cairo or Damascus.

Third, the strategy of tolerating ‘moderate Islam’ is seriously limited and constantly undermined by the relativist ‘multicultural’ framework of Western ‘post-modern’ democracy. Post-modern liberals are careful watchdogs against manifestations of intolerance among old-European citizens or US WASPs but they show no sensibility towards radical actions of intolerance among Islamic radicals all over the Western world. Western liberals do also show no mercy towards endangered and oppressed minorities of Christians, Jews or Zoroastrians in the Middle East. The cultural relativism gets easily into relativism of judgment in the courts, government institutions and the media of the West.

Last but not least, overlooking the dangers and threats of intolerant behavior – in multi-cultural communities and internationally – of Islamic radicals playing ‘moderate’ games might lead to radicalization of non-Muslim communities targeted by Islamist groups. For sixty years after WWII Europe has developed a culture of tolerance and respect to the other in the community which was needed to heal and overcome a long history of hatreds and conflicts culminating with Nazism. Europeans need to watch both themselves and the immigrant communities on European soil in order to avoid revival of ugly ghosts of the past. The terrorist acts committed by the Norwegian fundamentalist Breivik should serve as a wake-up call for all governments and citizens of Europe.

It is obvious that the international community should develop and sustain efficient tools of supporting more pragmatic, flexible and open to negotiations Islamic leaders and movements in the Muslim world. The strategy of supporting ‘moderate Islam’ however should be built upon deep knowledge of this religion and culture and it should be framed firmly by the priority to safeguard the values of liberal democracy, individual freedom and the identity of all nations and communities – those of the West included.

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