

Körber Dialogue Middle East

Arab Spring, Islamic Awakening? The Future of Political Islam and How to Deal with It

Berlin, October 14–15, 2011

The Körber Dialogue Middle East provides a platform for multilateral discussions on foreign policy and security issues relating to the Middle East. It seeks to bring together representatives of important stakeholders on a regular basis in order to foster an open and policy-oriented exchange of ideas. At the workshop in Berlin high-ranking foreign policy practitioners and representatives of leading think tanks gathered in order to discuss the role played by Islamic parties and movements in the Arab revolutions.

This summary contains a selection of specific arguments which we consider to be relevant to the current policy discussion. It is being distributed to the participants of the Körber Dialogue Middle East and selected policymakers.

SUMMARY OF THE DISCUSSION

I. Ready to Take Power?

Islamic Movements and the Arab Revolutions

While the discussants admitted that the Islamic parties and movements had been caught unawares by the outbreak of the “Arabellion”, they pointed out that **political Islam** was **quick to embrace** the revolutions in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya and other countries. There was general agreement that the adoption of pluralism by the political systems in the transforming countries would also lead to a **more pluralistic kind of political Islam**. The formation of new parties and the emergence of groups which have seceded from the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood lend credence to this belief. While the advent of a more pluralistic kind of political Islam was generally welcomed, some participants sounded a note of caution with regard to the **increasing influence of Salafist groups**, since these could easily obstruct the establishment of a new democratic order in the transforming countries.

One discussant argued that Islamic parties and movements such as the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and the Tunisian *Ennahda* party may well pursue a conservative and perhaps even an anti-liberal agenda in the social and cultural sphere. However, in the economic and welfare

sectors they will probably adopt pragmatic and more flexible positions. It was pointed out that the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood is currently undergoing a reorientation process in which its traditional positions – on both domestic and foreign policy issues – are being reassessed in the light of the new political realities. This process reflects the conviction that, whilst Islamic governance is firmly based on the principles of intent (*niyya*) and consultation (*shura*) and adherence to the moral code and religious law of Islam (*sharia*), the implementation of these principles calls for constant (re-) interpretation. One of the discussants was of the opinion that, even though the outcome of the reorientation process within the Muslim Brotherhood is still unclear, the fact that it is taking place at all is a sign of the **pragmatism and adaptability** of the movement and of the diversity of views within it.

It was said that the Muslim Brotherhood, like most other Islamic movements, was faced with the prospect of **generational change** in the leadership, and this was the reason for the wide range of views. One participant thought that the younger members of the Muslim Brotherhood would be happy to emulate the **example of Turkey's AK Party**. Another discussant reminded the group that the idea of subscribing to the principles of democracy was a fairly recent development in Islamic movements, which had traditionally rejected democracy as a “Western concept”.

Participants differed when it came to assessing the ability of Islamic movements **to switch from opposition to government**. Some claimed that they did not as yet have a fully-fledged socio-economic vision for the transforming countries and hence were reluctant to be “in the driver's seat”. Others pointed out that as a result of their organizational and ideological clout the Islamic movements were on the verge of taking power.

II. A Fraught Relationship: The West and Its Approach towards Political Islam

One participant believed that the “**Algeria syndrome**” (the concern that Islamic parties may abuse the democratic system in order to come to power and will eventually abolish democracy) and the “**gateway paradigm**” (the notion that Islamic parties are part of a path leading to radicalization and ultimately to terrorism) are at the bottom of the Western “fixation” on political Islam. Thus Western engagement with Islamic movements falls into three categories: low-level contacts, strategic dialogue, and fully-fledged partnership. Official contacts between Western governments and Islamic parties have generally been limited to the first two categories. Most participants were in favour of adopting a **pragmatic approach towards Islamic parties**, and believed that the behaviour of a party or movement (and not its ideological stance) should determine the West's level of engagement. While some discussants called on Western governments to engage with all of the politically relevant actors in the region, including Hamas and Hezbollah, others made a clear distinction between “**political Islam**” and “**resistant Islam**”. Some participants were of the opinion that groups directly implicated in attacks against Israel should be boycotted by diplomats and policymakers.

There was no consensus as to whether the West should try to instrumentalize Islamic groups that it considered to be moderate in order to counter other and more radical movements, e.g. by

“pitting” the Muslim Brotherhood against Salafist groups. Whereas some participants argued that the more militant elements would be weakened if moderate and radical forces were played off against each other, others were doubtful about the idea of **“countering a threat with another threat”**.

Several discussants believed that in order to pave the way for a constructive dialogue with Islamic movements, Western governments had to tackle the problem of **Islamophobia** in their own societies. Furthermore, they thought that it was absolutely essential to jettison the **“9/11 paradigm,”** which fails to make a distinction between Islam on the one hand and jihadism on the other. Participants also stressed that, from an Arab point of view, a constructive kind of engagement with Islamic movements would mean that the West would have to reconsider its unconditional support for Israel. It had to stop “being on the wrong side of justice”.

III. **“It’s the Economy, Stupid”:** **Regional and Foreign Policy in a Period of Transition**

With regard to the regional and foreign policy objectives of the transforming countries in general and of Egypt in particular, participants agreed that **measures designed to kick-start the ailing economy** should receive the highest priority. One discussant was of the opinion that Germany was going to be Egypt’s foremost economic and technological partner in the post-Mubarak era. Participants also called for greater efforts to promote **intra-regional economic cooperation**.

In the course of the debate it transpired that the new political actors in the transforming countries were still in the process of discussing and **formulating their foreign policy goals**. In the case of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood several participants stated that in spite of the distinctly anti-Israeli mood in the Egyptian population, a large number of the movement’s activists were in favour of respecting all of the international agreements concluded by previous governments, including the 1979 Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty. Nevertheless, they fully endorsed Egypt’s unconditional support for the Palestinian people. It was pointed out that a number of younger members of the Muslim Brotherhood were in favour of a **one-state solution** to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and were opposed to the two-state solution endorsed by the Middle East Quartet.

There was general agreement among the participants that the revolutions in the Arab world had led to a significant **shift in the regional balance of power**. Some discussants claimed that there was a power vacuum, since the major extra-regional powers, especially the US and the EU, had proved incapable of exerting a noteworthy influence on the course of the events in the region. There was no agreement when it came to trying to assess **Iran’s strategic position**. Some participants underlined the fact that as a result of the changes in the Arab world Iran has suffered a loss of soft power, whereas others claimed that the Islamic Revolution of 1979 has been a source of inspiration for the revolutionaries in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya and other countries. **Turkey** was seen to be the only non-Arab power which had benefited significantly from the transformation in North Africa and the Middle East. The participants emphasized the attractiveness of the **“Turkish model”**, although they also expressed a certain uneasiness about what were perceived to be **“neo-Ottoman tendencies”** in Turkey’s regional policy.

When it came to the major Arab powers, the participants thought that **Saudi Arabia's stability** did not seem to have been threatened by the Arab revolutions. However, the fact that it has taken the lead in trying to maintain the regional status quo may eventually weaken the Kingdom's position instead of strengthening it. One participant added that in the absence of an undisputed predominant power, smaller actors such as Qatar were playing an increasingly important role. In the light of the constantly growing political significance of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), he described the current situation as **"the Gulf's historical opportunity"**.

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