



Events

Islamic Movements: Transformations after the Arab Revolutions Post-Conference Report

AlJazeera Centre for Studies



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The conference on “Islamic Movements: Transformations after the Arab Revolutions”, was organized by Aljazeera Centre for Studies (ACJS), held on September 24th and 25th 2016. This report documents the views and perceptions voiced by the attendees: leaders of various Islamic movements, alongside researchers, scholars and experts on political Islamic groups.

In Brief

The conference was held six years after what is known as the Arab Spring. The Arab Spring resulted in several transformations in the Arab political and regional spheres and posed challenges to all intellectual and political groups, including the Islamist movements.

Twenty-three papers were put forth for debate at the conference by a variety of participants. It was pointed out that Islamist movements could not fit a single model since political, social and historic factors had their impact on the movement in question and how it dealt with its political realities. The difference between the various Islamist movements can clearly be seen by examining the revolutions currently in progress or by examining the patterns of leaders’ thinking during the various stages of revolutions and counter-revolutions.

It was revealed that Islamist movements have a new approach in their understanding of the concept of the nation state and the separation between religious “Dawah” (call) and politics. Emphasis was also put on the need for partnership and political reconciliation between all social strata in order to manage the transitional stage and in order to encourage the renouncing of the culture of “exclusion” and the notion of “replacing others”. The participants also expressed the need for Islamist movements to exercise institutionalized “self-criticism” in order to trace and control any possible flaws, as well as focusing on up-to-date intellectual enquiry and strategic planning.

Introduction

By early 2011, the significant changes experienced by some Arab countries marked a turning point in the Arab political and regional spheres. Islamists played a distinct role in the process of “political transition”. In Tunisia and Morocco, Nahdha and the Justice and Development Movements won the elections respectively, followed by the Freedom and Justice Party in Egypt. On the raging battlefields in Syria, Libya, Yemen and Iraq, high-profile Islamist movements have been involved in armed confrontations and in defying the counter-revolutionary movements that attempted to reverse the fledgling democratic trend.

Six years after the Arab Spring broke out, the political powers linked to the so-called “Islamic Movement” faced several local, regional and international challenges after the “deep state” – alongside the network of regional and international interests – have been able to impede the progress of democratic transition.

The dilemmas arising from the “successes” scored by the counter-revolutionary movement in the Arab Spring countries have been attributed to Islamist movements. Questions were also raised about how to deal with the political transition stage, and with regional and international influences. The intellectual, political and organizational transformations experienced by the diverse “Islamic Movement” over issues such as the functional separation between the Dawah and politics, and the modern state set up, were thoroughly debated.

Islamists Face Different Approaches and Options

The opening session on the first day of the conference tackled issues linked to the identity of Islamist powers and the circumstances of their formation. Some analysts have defined these circumstances as being created by political repression, along with

sectarian divisions and regional and international influences. Another school of thought distinguishes between different instances in the process of Islamist movements: The first instance is when Islamist movements are perceived as subsidiaries to an overall entity. But in the second instance, these Islamist movements have established local or national entities. In the aftermath of the Arab Spring, the Islamists dealt with the political transition process in different ways. Some of the movements supported the revolutions (Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen), while other movements went down the route of emulation and analogy, despite the variations (Mauritania). The exceptional Moroccan case, where the movements took advantage of the Arab Spring environment, has started a new political trend in Morocco.

Post-revolution Islamist Transformations

The second session of the conference examined the Arab Spring's intellectual, political and organizational impact on Islamist movements. A prominent feature of the organizational transformations within Islamist movements is the way in which Dawah, educational functions and political work have been separated out, allowing the functional role of politics and that of religion to be clearly defined. But according to some participants, the separation of politics and religion is not applicable in its absolute terms. Those advocating this viewpoint mentioned the resort to open political work within the other parties. Similarly, the tendency of selecting obscure and unknown leaders has changed to fully-publicised election campaigns with visible media coverage.

Though some believe that transformations in the Islamist arena have not settled down yet as the Arab region is still living in turmoil, this does not rule out an intellectual transformation within these movements with regards to their perception of the modern state. The revolutions have also motivated the Islamist movements to reassess their organizational structures, which tended towards elitism in the past. The chosen elites were not capable of bringing about the full transformation process, prompting some movements to adopt ideas of their parallel political parties.

Islamist movements are facing three challenges. The first one involves managing internal organizational affairs and the transformation into civil parties equipped with competent democratic institutions. The second is the awareness challenge: Islamist movements continue to exhibit poor performance in devising a theoretical background for a political scheme guaranteeing good governance. The third is the political challenge that involves the "national element": there still appears to be a feeling of guilt among Islamists over embracing a "national orientation".

Developments in Attitudes and Political Orientation

The third session of the conference reviewed developments in the attitudes of Islamist movements and their political orientation in the light of the processes adopted by the movement for change. One approach studied the impact of the general political environment on the Tunisian Nahdha movement. The movement has been transformed from a core opposition movement to one aiming to become a ruling or a partially-ruling party. The movement's largest transformation involved turning from an inclusive party into one specialized in managing political affairs. The transformation process has forced the Nahdha party to choose between the party's selfish interests by sticking to power as based on election results, or observing the country's interests and protecting the precarious Tunisian democratic experience. The importance of inter-party reconciliation should be emphasised during a democratic transition stage. For example, the Nahdha movement agreed to take part in the national unity government in order to support the fledgling democratic experience.

A different school of thought sees the Islamist group as just another facet of the ruling regime that seeks power-sharing opportunities, or at least that the Islamist group is in league with the ruling regime, without making efforts towards political rehabilitation for exercising power. At the level of the intellectual mission and organizational restructuring, this point of view supports the idea that some Islamist groups include pragmatists who have opted to working within local, regional, international, and even sectarian, frameworks. Some other groups embrace religious Dawah, social or educational calls, while others base their ideology on unseen prophecies. All these calls have relapsed into what appears to be a full redundancy stage.

One of the transformations mentioned by the participants involves the use of sectarianism – which is similar to tribalism – as a means to achieving power. In this respect, the Lebanese Hezbollah party plays a model for “political Shiism”, the Houthis in Yemen represent “Political Zaidyism” in their safeguarding of Zaidy community interests, where the sectarian minority has been transformed into a collaborative tribalism for the sake of achieving power or defending their interests and privileges.

In order to review all the aspects of these transformations, the conferees touched on the Western attitude towards the Arab Spring revolutions. Some noted that the Western attitude that prevailed at the beginning of these revolutions was prone to conceding to new realities that would eventually catapult Islamist movements to power. But this

sentiment has changed: it seems that nowadays Western countries are happy to see the practical termination of the Islamist strategy. The two different viewpoints represent the two trends of thought in the West, though both of them appear to be largely driven by national interests. A non-conformist trend is capable of being understood and is set for dialogue with the West that may achieve reconciliation. Another popular point of view understands most of the Islamist movements as representing a line of thought that contradicts the Western cultural scheme. The proponents of such thinking have been branded by Islamists as enemies.

Palestinian Resistance and Arab Spring Transformations

For the conference's final session on day one, Khalid Mishaal delivered a lecture where he reviewed the attitude of the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) during the various stages of the Arab Spring .

At first, the movement welcomed the Arab revolutions and gained political advantage when the resistance option was strongly supported. At this point, Hamas advised Islamist movements in Arab Spring countries to be rational in dealing with the realities on the ground and to thoroughly analyze and assess the situation.

During the second stage, after the counter-revolutionary groups reclaimed power, Hamas faced great challenges. The movement therefore turned to domestic reforms in order to strengthen its capabilities for survival, as well as seeking alternatives for resistance and pursuing inter-Palestinian reconciliation. The movement further opted to learn the lessons from the Arab Spring by maintaining a non-interference policy and managing explicit political relations aiming at fulfilling national interests.

Hamas has stated its views over how Islamist movements dealt with Arab Spring revolutions. Hamas noted two errors committed by Islamist powers. The first one was an exaggerated assessment of the realities in the Arab World and the way the victims of the Arab Spring reacted at both the local and regional levels. Secondly, their dealings with partners in these countries has been flawed. Though the majority gained via ballot boxes is important, it would not be enough for the Islamist movements to renounce power sharing and to seek the monopoly of power and decision making instead. Hamas also noted that the opinion of "replacing the other" was a flawed concept.

Lesson Learned from Islamist rule

At the first session of the conference's second day, some leaders from Islamist movements outlined their movements' experiences. One of the leaders of the Yemen Alliance for Reform said his movement sought power sharing in order to achieve Yemen's national interests. The statement was given after the movement's first elections experience in 1993. The party's main objective during its participation in all local, legislative and presidential elections was to boost political partnership and to adopt democracy as a single means for stability and sustainable development.

Despite the differences between the Algerian political environment and its counterpart in Yemen, the Algerian Peace Movement was also based on power sharing; they called for a return to the election process which had been suspended in 1992. Though the movement led by Sheikh Mahfouz failed to achieve any political gains, it was able to achieve significant strategic gains. Contrary to its counterparts in the Arab World, the Algerian Peace Movement is now experiencing stability without facing any pressure. In its experience of power sharing, the movement noted the negative impact of politics on the religious Dawah and on social work as a result of power rivalries. The movement thus effected a serious separation between religious and political functions. After exiting from government, the movement chose a new brand of opposition that avoided explicit confrontation with the regime, without supporting or seeking conciliation with it. Their practices as an opposition party were based on entirely national sentiments.

Contrary to the Algerian and the Yemeni experiences, the Islamic Front's involvement in the Sudan raised much controversy. The circumstances surrounding the military coup that brought the Islamist movement to power were also examined. At one stage, the movement superseded even the state and its institutions. Since the Sudanese Islamist experience came about without a previous model, it became the focus of deeper analysis. The lecture asserted that if any movement assumed power via elections, it should share power with other partners. If it took power via military coup, it should immediately reverse the coup by seeking to achieve as much power sharing as possible, something that never occurred in the Sudan under its Islamist rulers.

Meanwhile, the problems in South Sudan continued to pose a serious challenge, leading to the amplification of the role of the military and ultimately leading to the militarization of the movement. This empowered the security authorities who were then able to assert full control of the movement. Under these abnormal circumstances, the movement split into two rival parties and lost its political and intellectual footing, along with its moral

values. The power struggle ended up dividing Sudan into two countries, thus posing further potential danger.

The Syrian experience is entirely different. The situation in Syria is particularly complicated because the Islamists had never assumed power there previously. There are models and experiences of local rule as seen in swathes of the Damascus outskirts or Damascus eastern Ghouta. Meanwhile, Jaish al-Islam has been the unique operator for this experience which began to disintegrate after Jaish al-Rahman and Jaish al-Islam got involved in violent confrontations.

The Syrian opposition has been involved in the violence in Aleppo since mid-2012. The situation was made worse by the Assad regime ruthlessly targeting the city, in addition to the chaos resulting from the multiple schemes led by the Tawheed brigade, Ahrar al-Sham, Jabhat al-Nusra and the Free Syrian Army. In 2013, the al-Nusra Front and Ahrar al-Sham joined forces with other Islamist factions and took control of the city. The Syrian opposition was trapped inside with state facilities that ought to be operated for the residents' advantage. The operation failed because the two movements lacked the qualified civilian cadres for running these facilities. The end result was a confrontation with the city's residents, prompting the Islamic State to gain advantage by controlling the city. Finally, the events that unfolded in Idlib demonstrate the fact that Islamists failed to learn from their previous mistakes.

Possible Future for Islamist Movements

The performance of the Islamist movements, their response to the wave of "counter-revolution movements", and the major issues raised by their transformation these past few years has provoked fresh debate over their future. There are three external factors that may affect these movements' future: firstly, whether or not the process of excluding or routing out Islamists fails. Secondly, whether or not the war on terrorism fails, and thirdly, whether or not the Islamist movements will recover and will successfully integrate themselves into the general socio-political stream.

With regards to internal factors that may determine the future of Islamist movements, it will be important to observe whether the movements are able to reposition themselves inside the Arab blueprint for change and whether they are able to avoid reverting to exclusion mentality and to avoid going down the path of revenge sentiments against their partners in the change process. Furthermore, the Islamist movements would keep their cohesion in confronting the exclusion trend. It will also be vital for the movements'

success to ensure they reconsider pending issues and keep away from their strategically elusive policies.

The debate did not reach a decisive conclusion about whether the Islamist movements are heading for more isolation, or whether they would opt towards peaceful work and attempt to contain the former regime, or whether they would give support to counter-revolutionary movements, or whether they might chose the option raised by the "Islamic State".

The participants agreed that there was a need for cohesion within the Islamist movements in order to work towards introducing an Islamist political plan which would be capable of rebuilding society. Moreover, exercising self-criticism, devising a new leadership structure and developing a new look for the state and political performance, will also be vital to ensure their success.

Another school of thought introduces a performance metric in order to assess the Islamic movements' ability to effectively participate in shaping the future of their countries. These so-called "qualification essentials" for Islamist movements include: ability to criticize and to exercise self-correction, intellectual updating, ability to think critically, and ability to introduce strategic planning.

Epilogue

The debate at the conference examined several transformations in the political scene and the Arab regional system. Their impact on Islamist movements, along with the influence on their intellectual and political orientation, was examined. It is important to note that the various Arab Islamist movements differ considerably to one another: each movement will have its own political, social and historic trends which influence their choices and how they deal with their political realities.

The workings of the Islamist movements' "political mind" can be examined through their actions during the revolutionary process, particularly during the period of managing the various stages of revolutions and counter-revolutions and its aftermath in Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, Libya, Yemen and Syria.

Such events have necessitated a new trend in understanding changes and in contemplating the concept of the nation state. After endorsing the separation between Dawah and the political field, Islamists should politicise their Islamist activities and

performance, not orientating them. This trend may be strengthened via political practice by these Islamist movements.

The said experiences have revealed the need for partnership and political reconciliation between the various social and political powers in order to best manage this transitional stage. The participants reasserted the need for Islamist movements to renounce the culture of “exclusion” and “replacement of the other”. They also encouraged Islamist movements to develop institutionalised self-criticism alongside skills such as tracing and rectifying erroneous decisions, strategic planning, and intellectual updating.

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