

Introduction

Lorenzo Vidino

Before December 2010, virtually no one had heard of Mohammed Bouazizi outside of the dilapidated central Tunisian town of Sidi Bouzid. Yet when he set himself on fire in front of the local governor's office, in a desperate protest gesture against the confiscation of his goods and the apparent humiliation he suffered at the hands of the local police, the poor fruit seller became the symbol of a protest movement that engulfed first Tunisia and then large swaths of the Arab world, changing the region's history.

In Tunisia and in Egypt the protest movements managed to topple the authoritarian regimes that had ruled the two countries for decades with only a small amount of blood being spilled, as the militaries decided not to intervene against protesters. In Libya, on the other hand, protests against the Muammar Ghaddafi regime soon slid into a civil war that lasted until the fall, when the ruler was killed and the entire country fell into the hands of the militias headed by the Transitional National Council. Protests turned to violence also in Yemen, Bahrain and Syria, where at the time of this writing a real civil war is taking place. In virtually all other countries in the region there have been at least some protests against local regimes, testifying to the extensiveness of the phenomenon scholars have called the Arab Spring or Arab Awakening.

Few observers had foreseen such a momentous phenomenon. And most were also surprised that Islamist forces seemed to play only a marginal role, if any, in the protests. From Tunis to Cairo, from Sana'a to Homs, protesters criticized local regimes for their corruption and inefficiencies, demanded rights and jobs, and represented all walks of life and political persuasion. Islamic insignnia, demands for sharia and religious slogans were virtually absent. Indeed in some cases Islamist forces played an important role in organizing protests, thanks to their tested mobilization skills. Yet, due to the diverse nature of the protest movement, as well as Islamists' concerted decision not to visibly engage, in no country did the protests possess an Islamist undertone.

Yet, by the fall of 2011 and the first months of 2012, it became apparent that in several Arab countries Islamist movements were poised to be the main beneficiaries of the Arab Spring. In October, Ennahda secured 41 percent of the vote in the first post-revolutionary parliamentary elections in Tunisia, making it the country's main political party. Ennahda went on to lead a coalition government with secretary general, Hamadi Jebali, becoming its prime minister. After a lengthy process, in January 2012 Egyptian authorities announced that the Muslim Brotherhood's political party, Freedom and Justice, had won close to an absolute majority. Surprisingly, the Salafist al Nour won 25 percent of the votes, allowing Islamist forces a virtually unchallenged control over Egypt's People's Assembly. In June the Muslim Brotherhood's Mohammed Mursi won the country's first free presidential election.

The Islamists' victories in the only two post-Arab Spring elections constitute monumental developments. Although wielding different amounts of power in each country, over the last few months Islamist forces have come to play a crucial, if not dominating, role in the political life of a geographical arch that, with the qualified exceptions of Algeria and Libya, extends from Rabat to Gaza. Moreover, while the situation is still very confused, Islamists seem poised to play a greater role in other Arab countries, whether that is participating in toppling a regime (as it would be the case in Syria) or by demanding concessions of current rulers (as has increasingly been the case in Jordan).

In the ever-changing environment that is the Arab world of the last two years it is difficult to predict what will be the political developments of the near future and, similarly, what role Islamist forces will play in each country. But it seems fair to state generally that Islamism, in its gradualist and pragmatic approach embodied by the Muslim Brotherhood and its offshoots worldwide, seems ready to reap the rewards of its three decades-old decision to abandon violence, instead focusing on political participation and grassroots activities. Although they played only a marginal role in the Arab uprisings, Islamist movements are likely to be among the main beneficiaries of the Arab Spring, possibly using their political mobilization skills and grassroots legitimacy to gain positions of power in the nascent democracies of the region.

This monumental change has created many concerns among liberals, religious minorities and, more generally, all non-Islamists in the countries where Islamists have won. In addition, Arab states ruled by non-Islamist regimes have expressed concern. The former worry that Islamist ideology—even in its participatory and more moderate version—remains deeply divisive and anti-democratic, often at odds with their values and interests. They have concerns about the sincerity of Islamist parties' commitment to democracy and their views on religious freedom, women's rights and free speech. The latter believe that on foreign policy issues, most of the positions of various Muslim Brotherhood-inspired parties are on a collision course with the policies of established regimes in the region. Moreover they fear a spillover effect through which local Islamist forces will feel emboldened and challenge the countries' stability.

This E-book offers a different perspective on the Arab Spring and the apparently consequent surge to power of Islamists: namely, the West's. If participants and observers of the Arab Spring in the region have expressed shock at its developments, commentators and policymakers in Europe and North America have been similarly mesmerized by the events of the last 24 months. After failing to foresee the Arab Spring and its developments, the West is now asking important questions. What does the rise to power of Islamists mean for Arab countries and for the West? Will they respect the nascent democratic life of these countries? What will their stance on human rights be? How will their surge affect Arab countries' relations with the West and foreign policies?

This book seeks to analyze the reactions in eight Western countries to the rise to power of Islamists after the Arab Spring. "The West" is in reality, only an abstract mental construction, a non-existent geopolitical entity. Indeed it is possible to observe that some common positions, and super-national entities such as NATO and the European Union which have been heavily involved in the recent

events in the Arab world, do act as unifying entities for the West. But every country of “the West” has its own priorities, historical past, economic and geopolitical interests when approaching the Arab world and Islamist movements. Each must therefore be analyzed individually.

Moreover, no Western country possesses a well-developed, long-established, and cogent policy concerning participatory Islamist movements like the Muslim Brotherhood. In each Western country, positions have often changed not only with time, but also from Arab country to country. It is not uncommon, in fact, for a Western country to have held negative attitudes toward an Islamist movement in one country while seeking to engage a very similar Islamist movement in another. And all Western countries change positions based on political forces, as well as occasionally from individual to individual within the same political party, generating policies that can be described as schizophrenic.

This book provides an overview of each of eight countries’ policies towards Islamism. First, the authors outline the pre-Arab Spring history of relations of each country towards participatory Islamist movements in the Arab world. They then sketch each country’s attitudes and policies during the Arab Spring. And, finally, each author speculates about what the future holds, assessing how Western governments and political forces will likely interact with Islamist forces in the post-Arab Spring environment.

The first chapter, written by Steven Brooke, analyzes the United States, undoubtedly the country that, over the last four decades, has shaped the geopolitics of the region more than any other. Brooke, a young scholar with outstanding expertise on the subject, traces the history of the tormented relations between Washington and the Muslim Brotherhood, from timid Cold War era flirtation through the tensions of the last 20 years and, finally, to the begrudging opening of the post-Mubarak era.

The second chapter, written by Shiraz Maher and Martyn Frampton, traces the similarly convoluted relationship between the Muslim Brotherhood and affiliated movements on one end and the British government on the other. Maher and Frampton, two scholars based at King’s College and Queen Mary respectively, highlight the interconnections between British foreign and domestic concerns when dealing with Islamists, particularly as, in the post-9/11 era, British authorities sought to use British-based Islamists to counter al Qaeda-inspired radicalization among British Muslims (a policy Maher and Frampton criticize).

The importance of domestic concerns is also highlighted in the chapter Alex Wilner wrote on Canada. Wilner, a scholar at the Swiss Federal Polytechnic, shows how Western governments and publics often see events in the Muslim world through the prisms of their domestic debates over Islam and the integration of their Muslim community. The chapter by Roel Meijer, a well-known expert on Islam at the University of Nijmegen, highlights similar dynamics taking place in the Netherlands by analyzing how Dutch media and politicians have seen Islam and Islamism, both domestically and internationally, over the last ten years.

The chapter by Guido Steinberg, Germany's foremost expert on Islamism and jihadism, goes deeper in time, dissecting the various phases of the German government's interaction with the Muslim Brotherhood; from its timid flirtations during the Cold War to its post Arab Spring guarded engagement. Jean-François Daguzan, a longtime observer of French policies at the Paris-based *Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique*, traces a similarly long history of confused and occasionally conflicting policies enacted by France.

The chapter by Ana Planet and Miguel Hernando De Larramendi Martinez, two prominent Spanish Arabists, outlines the historical trajectory of the relationship between Spain and Islamists in North Africa, Madrid's traditional area of influence. Finally, the chapter written by Benedetta Berti, a scholar at the Institute for National Security Studies in Tel Aviv, deals with the views from Israel.

These contributions highlight important differences in the policies and attitudes of the eight countries analyzed. Each experience has been shaped by historical and geopolitical considerations unique to that country. Countries with a colonial past in the region, such as France and Great Britain, or with a deep involvement over the last decades, such as the United States, have well developed policies—even though that does not mean clear, coherent and permanent ones. Others that maintain only limited interests in the region have less developed policies toward—and even knowledge of—Islamist movements, and they often follow what leading Western governments do.

But despite important differences, there are striking similarities and recurring themes uniting all Western countries. While times, intensity and reasons vary, the historical trajectory followed by Western countries in their relationship towards the Muslim Brotherhood and, more generally, Islamist groups, follows a similar pattern. During the Cold War some Western countries timidly engaged the Brotherhood, assuming that it could be a partner in the conflict against Communism. With some notable exceptions, this engagement can hardly be considered an alliance. Relatedly, Western countries did not have an established policy towards Islamists, which were still a relatively small force.

As the Cold War ended, most Western countries stopped engaging Islamists. That happened largely for three overlapping reasons. First, the Iranian revolution triggered, for the first time, serious fears about Islamism in all Western capitals. Acts of violence carried out by various jihadist groups throughout the world in the 1980s and 1990s also contributed to these fears, particularly as the line between jihadist and Brotherhood groups was either blurred or poorly understood in the West. Second, Islamist positions on issues such as the compatibility between democracy and Islam, religious freedom, women's rights and Israel made Western policymakers very wary of the movement. Finally, authoritarian regimes throughout the region were very firm in demanding that their Western allies avoid engagement with Islamists.

Throughout the 1990s and 2000s there were various behind-the-scenes engagements, often through third parties like foundations and think tanks. But the events of the Arab Spring and the subsequent understanding that Islamists are going to be playing a crucial role in the shaping of the Middle East

in the immediate future have led policymakers throughout the West to change their policies. While there are significant differences from country to country, now virtually all Western countries openly engage with Islamist forces in the region. Some might be doing so more guardedly and less enthusiastically than others, but engagement is the standard Western position.

Two noteworthy factors seem common to all Western countries. The first is the awareness by all Western countries, including powers and superpowers like France, Great Britain and the United States, that they cannot influence the developments taking place in the region. Long gone are the days in which Western powers organized coup d'états or counter coup d'états, picking and choosing the region's rulers. Throughout the Arab Spring and the political processes that have followed, Western countries have taken a "sit and wait" approach, letting events take their natural course. With the exception of Libya, the West has not interfered in any significant way in any post-Arab Spring country. While often mantled by moral considerations and the respect for peoples' self-determination, there is no doubt that an awareness of the actual inability to shape events is the key reason behind this behavior.

Finally, most of these chapters show the importance of domestic considerations in Western countries' policymaking towards the region and Islamist forces. With the notable exceptions of the United States and Israel, in virtually all Western countries analyzed here, it is evident that policymakers consider the views and reactions of the growing Muslim, and particularly diaspora, communities on their territory. Moreover, all Western countries have been concerned with the impact of the Arab Spring on their security, giving the utmost importance to its impact on terrorism, immigration and the potential radicalization of the local Muslim community. While policymaking on Middle Eastern affairs is largely made by foreign ministries, it would be a mistake to ignore the enormous domestic political considerations that shape such process.