The War On Islamists

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Perhaps a war on political Islam has replaced the "war on terror" in a number of Arab countries after Islamists' successes at the ballot boxes through free and fair elections. The new war on Islamists has gained momentum after Egypt's July 2013 coup against the democratic process. The Egyptian authorities have declared the Muslim Brotherhood a "terrorist organization", a decision that appeared to come in the context of the political struggle that Egypt has witnessed since the coup.

Notably, this trend has coincided with similar moves made by other Arab regimes – namely in Iraq and Syria – despite the major differences between the circumstances in these countries.

What came as a surprise was the Saudi decision to declare the Brotherhood as a terrorist group. The Saudi decree, issued by King Abdullah, gives the terrorist label to other groups that have no intellectual or organizational relations with the Brotherhood. This demonstrates that the Riyadh has started a fierce battle against Islamists in the region after decades of coexistence with (and sometimes support from) the Saudi regime, which is why many observers saw the Saudi decision as a major and dangerous step.

The Saudi war on Islamists will have a considerable impact on the economic and political situation in the country, and it could trigger new disputes in Saudi society besides the already existent disputes and dilemmas. This can result in a magnification of the challenges that the country will face in the coming years.

In the same context, some allege that takfiri and violent groups emerged from the Muslim Brotherhood umbrella. But this allegation can be refuted if one looks at the issue from the other side: The fact that takfirs are offshoots of the Brotherhood proves that there is no place for such radical orientations within the ideological and political framework of the 80-year-old group, which promoted those extremists to break with the Brotherhood and take a different path. The Muslim Brotherhood has repeatedly stated that it rejects the ideology and acts of these groups.

This means that including the Brothers in the democratic process and helping them thrive can lead to curtailing support for violent and takfiri

groups among youth. The Brotherhood can constitute a moderate entity that is able to coexist with various factions of society. Instead of disrupting peaceful democratization in their countries and threatening those countries' national unity and interests by isolating moderate Islamists, Arab regimes would be better advised to include the Muslim Brotherhood in the political process.

It is worth mentioning that the ideological orientation of the Muslim Brotherhood is represented in other parties, such as the Freedom and Justice Party, the Felicity Party in Turkey, the Islamic Party in Pakistan, the Masyumi Party in Indonesia and others. All of these parties do not adopt violence as a means of political or social change.

Because of the considerable weight that Islamists in the Arab world carry, regimes' crackdown on them is expected to have major repercussions on the political participation of wide segments of Arab society, especially among youth. For Arab youth in general and religious youth in particular, the collapse of the democratization process is a failure of their dreams of freedom, innovation, and a political participation free of state violence and arrests. The youth of this generation constantly recall the recent past of authoritarianism, corruption, dependency and underdevelopment under pre-2011 regimes.

In light of the retreat of freedom and the return of the atmosphere of suppression, social and political forces in some Arab countries are not expected to opt for genuine opposition of regimes, which can result in the creation of societies suffering from fear and a fake political space that does not present alternatives to the ruling regimes. Authoritarian and repressive measures are expected to continue to be taken under the pretext of preventing the rise of Islamists to power.

This is the same pretext that was used to Arab regimes to convince the United States to abandon its 2004-2005 policy of promoting political reform and democracy in the Arab world: Arab regimes scared the West of Islamists' rule; they even created and supported extremist models of Islamist groups to keep the world scared of political Islam, which served the interests of these regimes and helped them cling to power and hamper real democratization.

Arab regimes' crackdown on the Brotherhood can have a negative impact on security and stability in the area because the crackdown on moderates gives way to extremist and violent groups that seek to counter the violence of the state. The regimes' suppressive policies can also have

serious long-term economic repercussions, not to mention their impact on citizens' social and cultural structure.

The chances of achieving democracy and good governance in the Arab countries that have waged battles against moderate Islamists are diminishing. These countries are likely to see a retreat from democracy and freedom toward dictatorship and oppression. Political and social forces, including Islamists, will not have equal opportunities to implement their platforms and accomplish their political objectives. The Arab states crackdown on Islamists will see more human rights violations and less transparency and accountability.

Thanks to the Western silence on the coup against the democratic path, and on declaring the Brotherhood a terrorist organization (although it has not carried out terrorist acts in line with the UN definition of terrorism), many in the Arab world have lost trust in democracy. Against this backdrop, violent confrontations with Islamists, who have a strong presence on the Arab street, could widen the gap between the political vision and objectives of the state on the one hand and the vision of social forces, especially Islamist forces, on the other hand.

This could worsen anti-Western sentiments among Arab peoples in light of Arabs' accusations of Western double standards on the grounds that Western powers tolerate their allies' violation of international law in dealing with democratically-elected movements. This calls into question the West's rhetoric about democracy and makes it easier for Al-Qaeda and its likes to recruit disillusioned Arab youth.

The Arab regimes that exclude Islamists from the political process are likely to exclude other forces as well, such their political rivals, forces whose interests conflict with the interests of those regimes, and social forces that have different ideological orientations. Therefore, the political scene in those Arab countries will continue to be dominated by one stratum, which could further tear society apart and spread the spirit of hatred among its members.

Having played a role in the Arab world's past and present, Islamist movements are likely to remain a key component of the region's future. Other forces had better realize the importance of upholding the democratic process in order to build stable democracies. If democracy brought Islamists to power in recent elections, it might not bring them to power in other rounds. The success of democratization requires eliminating phenomena like marginalization and exclusion of some forces

– let alone forces who did win free elections then they were punished and rounded up in prisons.

By demonizing Islamists, Arab regimes are breeding evil and stirring up turbulence in the region, and indirectly encouraging the formation of violent, takfiri groups.

It is high time Arabs engaged in a comprehensive dialogue in which the region's rational voices take part, with the aim of eliminating violence, extremism, and takfiri orientations. Such a dialogue is important for preventing the spread of hatred among Arab citizens; achieving national partnership; and ending ideological, partisan, sectarian and ethnic exclusion and marginalization.

This is the only way to consolidate the concept of the nation state in the Arab world, and guarantee leading roles for Arab states in the regional and international arenas.

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