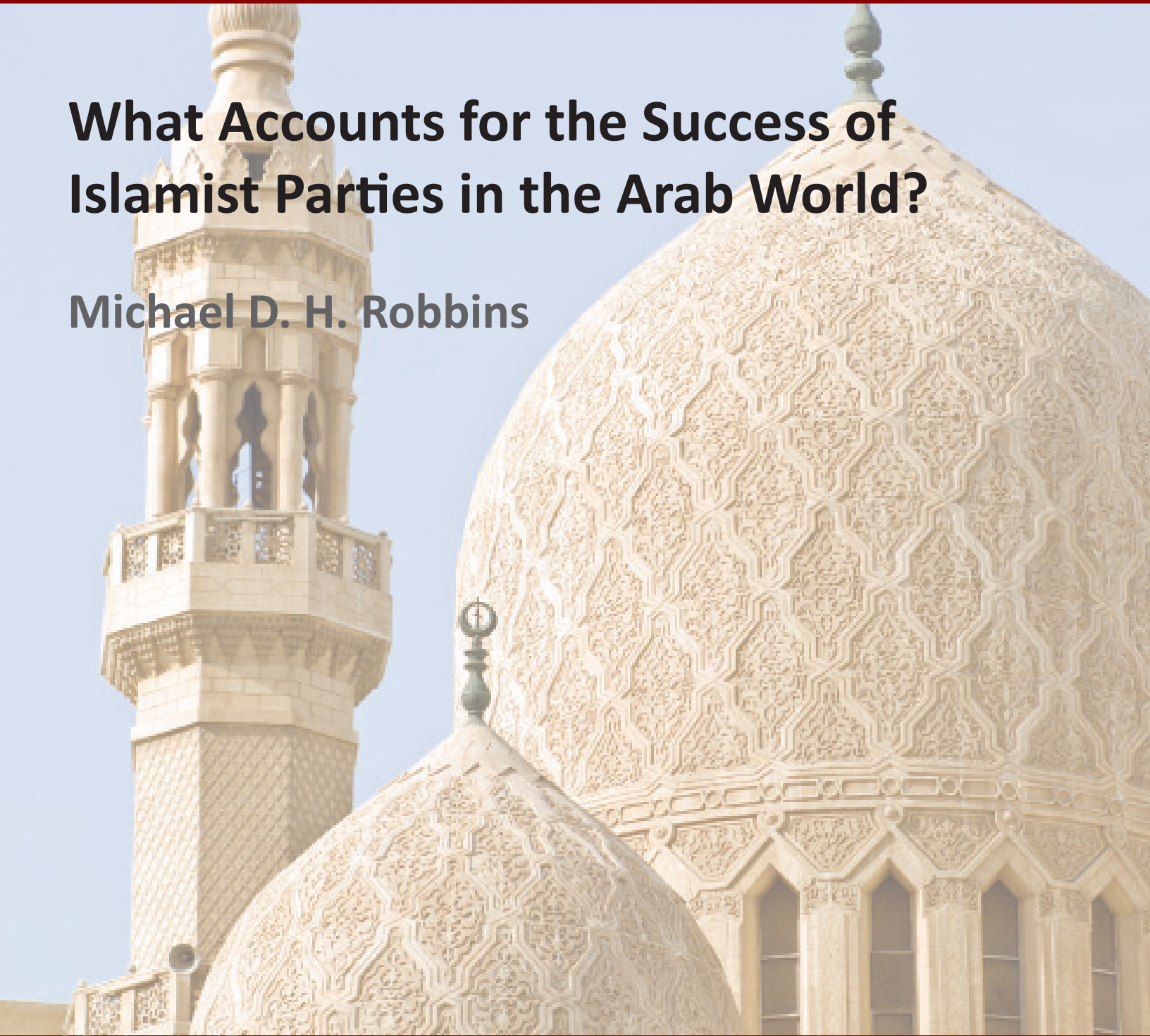


THE DUBAI INITIATIVE برنامج دبي

What Accounts for the Success of Islamist Parties in the Arab World?

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Support for Islamist Parties

Islamist organizations are generally considered to be the strongest and most credible opposition to incumbent regimes throughout the Arab world. Fear of Islamic takeovers has led regimes and outside powers to justify the suppression of free elections by citing the Algerian election of 1991, the Iranian Revolution, the AKP victory in Turkey, and the perceived popularity of Islamist opposition groups throughout much of the Arab world (Brumberg 2002). Yet, other analysts have questioned the actual strength of Islamist movements, noting that although Islamists may be the main challengers, few have actually been successful in taking power (Roy 1994).

A closer examination reveals some distinct differences in stated support for Islamist parties throughout the Arab world, in countries for which survey data is available (see Table 1).

Table 1: Stated support for Islamist parties¹

	Jordan	Algeria	Yemen	Morocco	WBG
Population	1.4%	5.4%	9.1%	9.5%	41.0%
Voters	1.5%	8.1%	12.8%	9.3%	42.1%

Source: Arab Barometer 2006, 2007 (www.arabbarometer.org)

The results demonstrate that there is at present a vast difference in support for Islamist parties in different societies. While support for the IAF in Jordan is extremely low, support for Hamas and Islamic Jihad in the West Bank and Gaza is relatively high. Figures from Algeria, Morocco, and Yemen are mid-range, showing some but not very substantial support for the Islamists. However, considering the relatively low rates of partisanship in these societies, the parties demonstrate a moderate level of support, especially among the voting population.

Examining support by vote share, there is greater support for Islamist parties as seen in Table 2, due to strategic voting and differences in the voting population compared to the non-voting population. In this case, support for parties in Algeria, Jordan, Morocco, and Yemen all increase substantially, while support remains relatively constant in the West Bank and Gaza. Overall, the pattern is largely consistent with results using stated support for Islamist parties: Jordan remains well below all other cases, support in Algeria is slightly less than in Morocco (among voters), and support in Yemen is slightly higher than either country. Support in the West Bank and Gaza remains much higher than the others.

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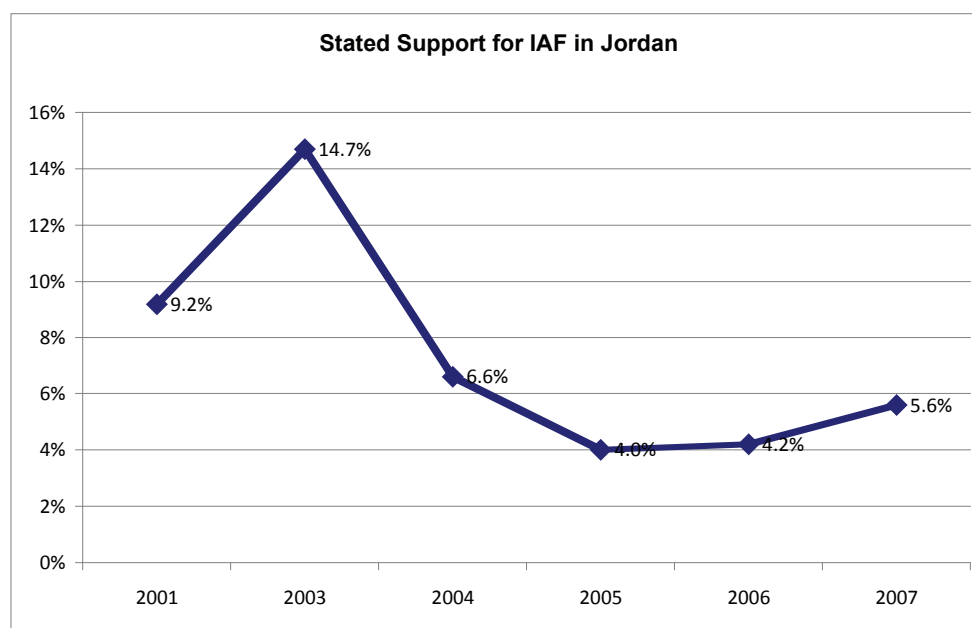
¹ Item asks respondents which party if any “best represents you politically, socially and economically?”

Table 2: Vote share for Islamist parties in parliamentary elections

	Jordan	Algeria	Yemen	Morocco	WBG
Vote Share	6.9%	15.6%	22.6%	16.4%	44.5%
Year	2007	2007	2003	2007	2006

Support for Islamist Parties Over Time

While it is possible to gain a cross-sectional view of support for Islamist parties for numerous countries, examining support for these parties over time is more challenging. In Jordan, some evidence is available. While it is possible to examine the number of seats won by the IAF over time, changes in electoral rules and districts limit the comparability of this approach. However, evidence based on vote share and public opinion surveys does exist. Vote totals reveal that the IAF won 16.9% of the vote in the 1993 election (Hourani 1995) compared to only 6.9% in 2007.² Meanwhile, public opinion polls conducted since 2001 also confirm this decline over time as seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1

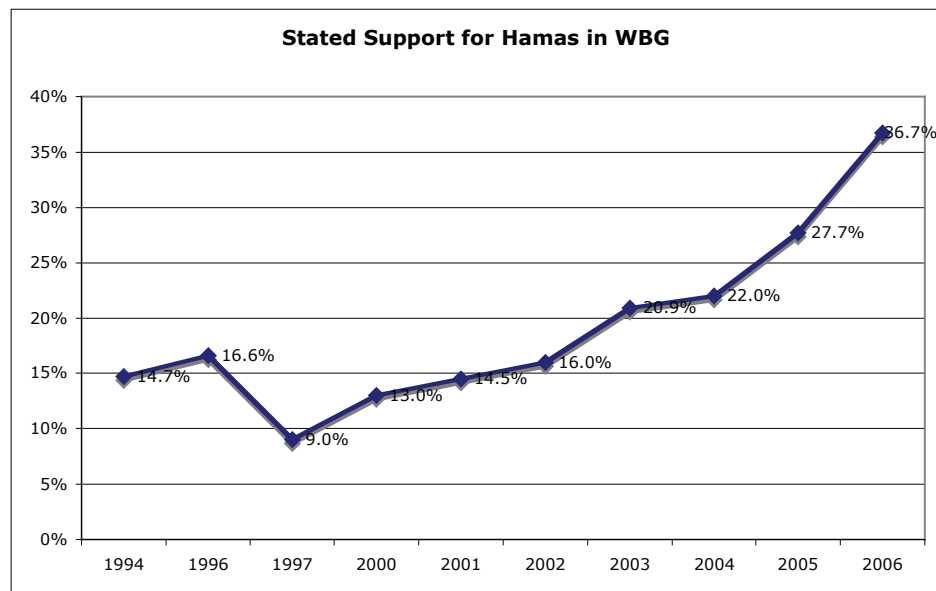
Source: Center for Strategic Studies, University of Jordan (www.css-jordan.org)

Since 2001, there appears to be a general decline over time in stated support for the IAF with two exceptions: 2003 and 2007. Both of these years, however, represent election years and the surveys were conducted shortly after the election in both cases. Thus, a comparison of stated support in non-election years represents a decline from around 9% to approximately 4% over a five-year period while stated support in election years declined even more dramatically from nearly 15% to just over 5% over a four-year period.

² The IAF boycotted the 1997 election and totals are not available for the 2003 election.

While support for the IAF in Jordan has decreased over time, support for Hamas in the West Bank and Gaza has witnessed the reverse trajectory. While data from elections is limited in this case, there is a long record of public opinion surveys. Support for Hamas from 1994 to 2006 is shown in Figure 2. Overall, the findings reveal that in the first ten years, support for Hamas generally hovered around 15% before undergoing a consistent rise from 2003 to 2006.

Figure 2



Source: Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (www.pcpsr.org)

Theories about the Success of Islamist Parties

Islamists Win Free Elections

Following the Iranian Revolution, much of the so-called Islamist threat came from the success of Islamist candidates in the 1989 election in Jordan, followed by the presumed Islamist victory in the 1991 Algerian elections (Esposito 1999). Together with the Hamas victory in the 2006 parliamentary elections in the West Bank and Gaza, some have suggested that Islamists will generally succeed in free and fair elections in the Arab world. For example, the Egyptian regime consistently uses the Islamist threat to justify its decision not to hold free and fair elections (Kepel 2003).

A closer examination of Algeria and Jordan, however, reveals that Islamist parties and candidates had a significant advantage due to the disorganization of the political system (Layachi 2004). In this vacuum, the Islamist opposition is likely to perform quite well due to existing network connections through the mosque (Wiktorowicz 2004). Moreover, since both countries employed a form of winner-take-all electoral system, candidates with relatively small vote shares can win elections. As a result, rather than a resounding victory for Islamists, both of these cases are more likely the result of Islamists being carried to victory based on their superior organization and the ability to win a plurality of the votes.

By comparison, in Yemen the Islah party did not achieve the same level of electoral success in the country's first relatively open election in 1993 (Carapico 1993). In this case, the General People's Congress, a party based around long-standing tribal alliances in the north, and the Yemeni Socialist Party, the former party of the state in the south, were both competing (Schwedler 2005). While Islah did better than expected, it was only able to win 20 percent of the seats in parliament given greater organization within the political system.

Islamist Parties Differ Across Societies

A second claim about the variation in the success of Islamist parties argues that differences in Islamist parties themselves account for this variation. For example, some Islamist parties have formally rejected violence such as the IAF or Islah, while others such as Hamas and Hizbullah have often undertaken violent acts. Moreover, while these parties are categorized as Islamist, the exact nature of their ideology may vary. Some parties trace their roots to the Muslim Brotherhood, but the PJD in Morocco and Hizbullah in Lebanon do not.

n no case is actually calling for Islamic law a better predictor of support for an Islamist party than a greater role for religion in politics.

Based on the results of statistical analysis (see Robbins 2009), while the appeal of Islamist parties to average citizens varies somewhat between cases, there are striking similarities between Algeria, Jordan, Morocco, the West Bank and Gaza, and Yemen. In all cases, individuals who choose to support these parties are those who are seeking a greater role for religion in the public sphere. While party leaders may use strong rhetoric, ordinary citizens supporting them tend to be less radical. Surprisingly, in no case is actually calling for Islamic law a better predictor of support for an Islamist party than a greater role for religion in politics.

Second, in all cases, one of two additional variables is significant: opposition to the regime or use of *wasta*.³ Thus, while support for a greater role for religion is important, it is also necessary for an individual to be opposed to the existing regime or to receive some form of services or other benefit from the Islamic movement.

Support Over Time

While the statistical model examines a single point in time, support for Islamist parties is a dynamic phenomenon that can change over time. In the cases of Jordan and the West Bank and Gaza it is possible to trace such changes. In Jordan, the IAF originally had significant electoral success although it won only 16.9% of the vote in the 1993 election. Since that time, support has decreased to around 6.9% in the 2007 election. In the West Bank and Gaza, opinion polls show that support for Hamas was similar to that of the IAF. Yet, during the same period support for Hamas rose to 44.5% in the 2006 election.

Importantly, there are numerous similarities between these two parties. First, both of them have roots in the Muslim Brotherhood movement (Abu-Amr 1993 and Wicktorowicz 2001). While the organization and ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood varies somewhat by country, its fundamental ideology is relatively constant. This is especially true in Jordan and the West Bank, both of which were

³ *Wasta*, literally meaning an intermediary or connection, is the use of connections to receive personal benefits. For a detailed discussion of *wasta*, see Kilani and Sakijha 2002.

part of the same country until 1967 and had the same branch of the Muslim Brotherhood operating throughout its territory. While Hamas was founded out of the Gaza branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, its expansion to the West Bank necessitated working with the pre-existing Islamic movement in this area.

Second, the ability of the parties to compete in politics is relatively similar. In both cases the parties have been able to compete in elections and have not been subject to official bans as in other Arab countries. Although neither country is considered fully democratic, Freedom House has rated them “partly free”, compared to most other countries in the region described as “not free” (Freedom House 2006). As such, these parties have had a greater opportunity to compete than in other societies. Moreover, in both cases all parties including Islamist parties are allowed to participate in elections. In light of Lust-Okar’s (2004) findings regarding the Structures of Contestation (SoC), this similarity has important implications for the nature of the political system and the possibilities for opposition parties. Thus, this comparison also controls for this variable.

Critically, numerous other variables can also be held essentially constant. In Jordan, well over half of the population is of Palestinian origin. While the experience of the Palestinians on the East Bank of the Jordan River is not identical to those on the West Bank, many of their concerns are. Claims that the Palestinian case is unique based on the Israeli occupation can therefore be moderated given the large presence of Palestinians in Jordan. If this issue alone accounted for the success of Hamas, then one would expect that the IAF in Jordan, which vehemently opposed the 1994 peace treaty with Israel (Lynch 1999), would be more successful overall.

Moreover, Hamas’ external wing was based in Jordan until 1999. During this time, strong links between the two parties were forged (Mishal and Sela 2000). Officially, the two parties in fact claimed to be the same party until shortly after the 2007 elections in Jordan (Gharaibeh). Nevertheless, contact continues between the two and within Palestinian areas. Much of the IAF’s appeal in Palestinian areas is based on the perceived linkages with and support for Hamas.

Competing Identities and Party Success

While the dominant interpretation of voting in Jordan is that it is tribal, a closer examination reveals a more complex reality. According to a 2007 post-election poll (CSS 2007), only 48.3% of voters took family or tribal affiliation into consideration when voting. However, there is an important difference in voting between Palestinians and Transjordanians⁴ as seen in Table 3.

While the dominant interpretation of voting in Jordan is that it is tribal, a closer examination reveals a more complex reality.

Table 3: Tribal affiliation affected vote choice

	Transjordanian	Palestinian
Yes	56.8%	19.3%
No	43.2%	80.7%
Total	100.0%	100.0%

Source: CSS 2007

⁴ Transjordanian (also Jordanian-Jordanian or East Banker) denotes individuals who are from the East Bank of the Jordan, meaning within the boundaries of modern Jordan.

While tribal affiliation plays a very limited role in vote choice for Palestinians, it is quite important for Transjordanians. Given that more than half of individuals of Jordanian origin take tribal affiliation into consideration, the IAF confronts a significant challenge. In order to win support, the IAF must either be able to mitigate this effect or to work through tribal alliances to win election.

The nature of the electoral districts poses a further challenge for the IAF in overcoming tribal affiliation, as the districts were drawn to help ensure that their boundaries approximated those of major tribes (Patel 2006). Thus, the IAF must either overcome the importance of tribal affiliation to create a winning coalition of supporters with multiple tribes or work with an individual tribe to secure its support.

Yet, the nature of these districts has had an additional effect on voting. While powerful tribes tended to perform very well, smaller tribes have begun to coordinate in order to compete. It is now common for smaller tribes to reach pacts with other tribes to support a common candidate. However, this type of coalition building is more difficult for the IAF. If the IAF does coordinate with a tribe, most likely the result will be a candidate with dual loyalty to both his tribal constituency and to the IAF. In such a situation, it is unclear whether the candidate, once elected, would be loyal to the IAF or to the tribe.

While the IAF confronts severe challenges in winning support from individuals of Jordanian origin, given the low importance of tribal affiliation amongst those of Palestinian origin, the claim that tribal affiliation lowers support for the IAF among this group is unlikely. This is especially true given that the party, despite official denials (Gharaibeh), appears to have targeted Palestinian-Jordanians in recent years (Patel 2006).

While tribal affiliation does not play a great role for individuals of Palestinian origin, evidence suggests that regional affiliation does. Table 4 shows the importance of regional identity in vote choice for the 2007 parliamentary election by country of origin.

Table 4: Regional Identity and Vote Choice⁵

	Transjordanian	Palestinian
Yes	68.4%	69.7%
No	31.6%	30.3%
Total	100.0%	100.0%

Source: CSS 2007

This table demonstrates the significant role of regional affiliation for Jordanians of Palestinian origin. The finding is corroborated by the existing literature, which notes that Palestinians in Jordan feel a strong bond to their historical city or village in Palestine rather than to their tribe (Brand 1995). Since families and tribes were often scattered throughout historic Palestine, individuals developed ties

⁵ It should also be noted that a greater percentage of Jordanians indicated that regional affiliation affected their vote choice than did tribal affiliation. However, given the rural nature of Jordan historically, this finding does not entirely dismiss “tribal” voting in place of “regional” voting. Unlike in the more fertile areas west of the Jordan River, tribes and geographic areas to the east of the river tended to overlap more consistently. Additionally, for Jordanians that do not vote in their historical homelands due to having moved to urban areas, it is less likely that tribal identity would affect their vote choice, which may also explain this difference.

within settled communities that were maintained after West Bankers fled to the East Bank.

However, there is evidence to suggest that Palestinian regional identity is not equally strong among all members of the Palestinian Diaspora in the Middle East. Namely, the importance of regional identity has been shown to be less important in refugee camps than in other areas. When asked about this difference, one local citizen responded simply: “In the camps we are a very poor people. We have nothing except the dream of returning to Palestine. We know who comes from what region, but here it does not matter. What matters is Palestine, and the parties there.”

There is evidence to suggest that Palestinian regional identity is not equally strong among all members of the Palestinian Diaspora in the Middle East

If the hypothesis is true that competing identities limit IAF success, then support for the IAF should be higher in refugee camps. Estimating vote totals in the camps is difficult due to the fact that no electoral district encompasses only one refugee camp. However, Balqa-4, a single-member district, is made up almost entirely of the Baqa’a refugee camp. In this case, Mohammad ‘Aqel won with nearly 25% of the vote in 2007. The IAF also received strong support in Amman-1 and Amman-2, which also contain refugee camps. As such, there is clear evidence to suggest that in refugee camps where regional identities are less important than in other areas, IAF candidates have greater success.

While Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza also have strong regional identities, this identity has a very different effect on Hamas’ prospects due to the nature of electoral institutions in the West Bank and Gaza. Unlike Jordan where the Palestinians from different towns are scattered throughout electoral districts, in the West Bank and Gaza the nature of the electoral system minimizes its importance in vote choice. In the list system, it is possible to balance regional identities to minimize any effect (Shaer). In the majority system component of voting, districts are concentrated around a major city and the areas surrounding it. Thus, most if not all candidates in a given district are likely to be residents of that district.

With the importance of regional identity playing a lesser role in the Palestinian system, it is more likely that Hamas will be able to win support as a political party. While this variable does not fully explain its increase in support, it does increase the possibility of winning support.

The Political Spectrum and Party Success

Two-thirds of Jordanians state that the greatest problem facing their country is the economic situation (Arab Barometer 2006). Yet, during elections, the debate focuses on improving services for constituents rather than any economic policy. While the IAF also promises to improve government services, given the lack of a traditional left-right spectrum or any other clear spectrum, it faces a challenge distinguishing itself from other candidates.

Moreover, due to the nature of its Islamist ideology, the IAF struggles to articulate a coherent economic policy. While Islam has much to say about both political and social outcomes such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the war in Iraq, and the effects of Westernization, it has relatively little to say about modern economic problems including unemployment or a national plan for development. As such, despite the concerns of most Jordanians, it is unsurprising that 95% of

the IAF's declarations and statements on its website from 2004 to 2006 dealt with the Arab-Israeli conflict, political reform, regional Arab affairs, and its relationship with the state (Abu Rumman 2007). Meanwhile, only 4.3% of its material has dealt with economic issues.

As would be expected, Hamas' primary focus also tends to be on political issues, especially as it relates to the Arab-Israeli conflict. Yet, unlike in Jordan, within the West Bank and Gaza political concerns are of a much greater concern, with over half of Palestinians believing that the Israeli occupation is the most important problem facing their society (Arab Barometer 2006). Given the sacred nature of Jerusalem and other sites, Hamas, using an Islamist framework, can convincingly make claims about the peace process and about ending the occupation.

Perhaps even more importantly, there is a clear political divide on the Israeli-Palestinian issue. Since 1993, Fatah has been in favor of the peace process with Israel, promising tangible benefits for the population as a result of this process, while Hamas has not.

In his analysis of the 2006 parliamentary election using public opinion data, Lahloh (2006) concludes that the most important issue in the election was the peace process followed by corruption. Given that both these issues fit well into the Islamist ideology, they played to Hamas' advantage. Moreover, given the failure of the peace process in the eyes of most Palestinians, the public was more in line with Hamas than Fatah on this critical issue. Combined with the general perception of Hamas as being relatively uncorrupt, it is in many ways surprising that Hamas only won 44.5% of the vote overall.

Policy Implications

The findings have numerous implications for U.S. foreign policy. First, given that Islamist parties receive a baseline support of around 15%, under normal circumstances it is unlikely they will win elections if allowed to participate in the political process. While 15% makes supporters of Islamist parties a sizeable—and often the largest—opposition minority within the political system, in most systems electoral success requires a much greater support. One important exception is in the chaos that normally surrounds an election following rapid political liberalization. If parties were illegal or the opposition severely repressed, it is possible for 15% support to win a sizeable number of seats in free elections in a majoritarian system. Yet, evidence suggests that when parties or electoral coalitions are preexisting, as was the case in Yemen's 1993 election, Islamist parties are unable to have the same success as in Algeria in 1991 or Jordan in 1989.

Yet, while Islamist parties are unlikely to win elections given the size of their support, it is also unlikely that they will soon become politically irrelevant. When allowed to participate, Islamist parties will likely have a voice and even influence political outcomes in certain instances. This is especially true as some regimes may attempt to co-opt certain Islamist issues to limit their support. For example, recently in Yemen the regime turned a blind eye to a vigilante group enforcing Islamic law in some cities, in the hopes of weakening Islamist challengers. Nevertheless, the claim by many regimes in the region that political liberalization would lead to an Islamist takeover is largely unfounded.

When allowed to participate, Islamist parties will likely have a voice and even influence political outcomes in certain instances.

Second, Hamas' success is the exception rather than the rule. While many analysts have feared Islamist takeovers based on Hamas' success at the ballot box, in reality the situation in the West Bank and Gaza presented an ideal situation for an Islamist party. For one, the nature of competing identities is not a limiting factor for Hamas in Palestinian politics. Even more importantly, politics in the West Bank and Gaza is dominated by the Israeli occupation and the corruption of the Palestinian Authority. Both of these issues strongly favor an Islamist party such as Hamas. Moreover, the clear cleavage that exists in terms of policy toward the peace process allowed Hamas to present a clear alternative to Fatah in the election.

While Hamas could capitalize on these conditions, similar ones are not present in most Arab societies. In most countries, the public is most concerned about economic outcomes rather than political issues (Arab Barometer 2006-7). This concern plays into a fundamental weakness for Islamist parties as they struggle to deliver a clear and coherent economic program based on their underlying Islamist ideology. Rather, despite the knowledge that most citizens are concerned with economic issues, Islamist parties often spend much of their time on political or social issues, which are unlikely to be major vote-winners during the election.

Third, Islamist parties are only likely to be successful when they can appeal to citizens for "un-Islamic" reasons. For example, Hamas rose to prominence in the 1990s based on a core group of Islamist supporters. Yet, despite a vast array of social service provision and militant activity against Israel, it did not win broad support among Palestinians. In fact, Hamas' rise in popularity after 2000 largely coincided with the failure of the peace process in the eyes of most Palestinians. Yet, while Hamas frames this issue from an Islamist perspective, the party's appeal to ordinary citizens is primarily due to their frustration at the failure of the peace process. As such, Hamas' rise is in fact due to a policy position rather than to its religious nature.

Fourth, bringing Islamist parties into the political system can actually decrease their support. While Islamist parties have certain strengths, they also possess critical weaknesses that limit their success. In Jordan, the IAF has not been able to overcome challenges from appeals to tribal and regional identity. Given the increased coordination between tribal and regional coalitions over time, overall support has continued to decrease. Moreover, their inability to address economic concerns has made them increasingly irrelevant in the political system. Given the strength of competing identities in most Arab states, especially family or tribal identity, allowing Islamists to compete is likely to decrease their success over time.

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