INTRODUCTION

The 2011 uprisings across the Arab world spectacularly removed decades-long regimes from power in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen and threaten to do so in Syria. The once-imagined prospect of Islamist political forces playing a central role in the region’s future is now a reality. The complex challenges of defining what Islamism means in this new political setting, who are its leading protagonists, what are their qualities, and ultimately what are their goals remain fundamental to efforts to successfully navigate the region’s domestic politics, security and stability and international relations. This paper attempts to offer some understanding of the movement in its most modern form – as an emphatically political phenomenon in the context of the Arab Spring – and what this means for both Arab Muslim states and their western counterparts, now.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Political Islam, or ‘Islamism’, has always been wedded to political interests within the Muslim world. The 2011 uprisings across the Arab world have turned the once-imagined prospect of Islamist political forces coming to power in the region into a reality. Understanding the role of Islamist political leaders in Egypt and elsewhere and the direction in which they are now taking their countries is a complex task: modern Islamists occupy a broad spectrum of political, ideological and social strata. At this stage, we cannot be 100% sure that even the most moderate Islamists’ goals may not ultimately be detrimental to their home states, to western interests, to international relations, global trade and security.

Two years after Mubarak fell, little has changed at the core of Egypt’s establishment, and nowhere is the sense of enduring authoritarianism more evident than in the current Muslim Brotherhood government. So far its preoccupation with consolidation of power, networks of patronage and reluctance to engage with other political actors is hobbling political progress and development. They have so far been short on ideas and policies to address pressing issues such as the provision of sufficient jobs, alleviation of suffering, or offer a sense of progress and hope for a young and impatient population. Egypt faces a terrifying demographic time bomb: its population has grown by 90% over 30 years, from approximately 45million to 85million, with a ‘youth bulge’ that has left 50% of the population under 25 and mostly jobless.

If Egypt’s Islamist government continues on its current course, at some point it will likely falter and fall. Popular disillusionment and impatience with the apparent shortcomings of Islamist political solutions risks a desperate population abandoning democratic political processes in favour of more radical action, leaving open the possibility of an ensuing battle for ownership of Egypt’s revolution, as a swing to more radical solutions offered by religious fundamentalist forces is met by fierce resistance from their secularist opponents. Should Egypt’s political process disintegrate thus threatening a descent into mass unrest and violence, it is likely that the military will reluctantly step in to protect the country’s stability and security. However, the military’s steadfastness should not be taken for granted. Forced to take sides in an increasingly divisive sectarian struggle, internal ideological divisions in the military organization itself may come to the fore to undermine its unity.
Meanwhile, Islamist governments are quickly transforming the realities of foreign and security policy of the region. Political leaders are under increasing popular domestic pressure to harden their stance on a number of high profile issues – relations with Israel and ongoing cooperation with international counter-terrorism operations being key. The broader message resonating across the region seems to be that expecting newly empowered Islamists to automatically return their gratitude and support to western governments for ultimately coming down against former regimes is potentially naïve and misguided.

One apparent consequence of the destabilizing effects of the Arab Spring upon the entire North African region has been a surge in Islamist militant activity. The ongoing Malian rebellion and January 2013 Algerian hostage crisis have highlighted the dangers of weakened central authority, loosely controlled borders, and the presence of militants eager to capitalize on a lack of security. Equally, the ‘ungovernable’ nature of Egypt’s Sinai Peninsula bears similar characteristics to the North African deserts: in each location, the immediate interests of both indigenous nomadic tribes and international militant jihadist groups have clearly aligned. Yet policies that fail to make clear distinctions between these groups perpetuate the likelihood of driving radicalised local recruits into the arms of the extremists rather than starving those most insidious, anti-western elements of the local support that they need to survive.

Western governments now have little choice but to engage with democratically elected Islamists and whatever governments they form. Such an opportunity could be used to sincerely hold future international partners to account in their commitment to building free, fair and open societies and representative systems of government. While engaging with Islamist counterparts on potentially problematic issues, emphasis on the more practical considerations of competency and workability rather than a preoccupation with ideological conflicts would help to recast issues such as the role of women in the workplace, laws that may hinder economic growth, and human rights as primarily concerns over effective government rather than questions over their religious character.

Whilst the future prospects of Egypt’s current Islamist government appear troubled at best, we should resist the temptation to do nothing, to step back and gamble on the chances that the Islamist forces will eventually implode. What would happen next in the case of their failure matters to both Britain and the global community. In the face of growing instability, worst-case scenarios for Egypt and the Arab Spring have so far been dismissed as overly pessimistic, yet events have proven them to be accurate. Western governments ought to be countenancing the real prospects of further, more serious crises unfolding and having at least some contingencies in place.

Finally, there is an opportunity to distinguish between the broad spectrum of Islamist groups, and to marginalize and counter the most radical and anti-western ones in their own countries and amongst their own constituencies. This could be attempted through balancing support for moderate, competent political forces of all ideological persuasions and allowing for the creation of political spaces and opportunities that expose the significant shortcomings and incompetence of certain Islamist groups that have so far been untested both at home and abroad. In the face of severe and pressing political challenges amidst restive and vulnerable populations, the more radical Islamist policies pushing negative, destructive agendas could be revealed as being dislocated from and detrimental to the basic, popular needs of their populations.
ISLAMISM AND POLITICS

Defining political Islamism can be a political, historical and philosophical distraction, which is best avoided, but some shared understanding of background is useful.

Islamism has always been wedded to political interests within the Muslim world. The Muslim Brotherhood was founded in Egypt in 1928 primarily as a nationalist response to British colonialism, but commentaries that take this as a starting point fail to account for the teaching of scholars before western imperialism had left a serious mark on the Islamic world. In particular, nineteenth century Islamic thinkers such as itinerant reactionary Jamal-al-Din al-Afghani who spent much of his life in foreign exile, Mohammad ‘Abdou who was Mufti of Egypt in 1899, and Mohammad Rashid Rida, an early Syrian advocate of modern jihad, were all preoccupied not only with religious debate, but also with political issues ranging from education to East-West relations to the limits of power of national rulers to the emancipation of women that still resonate strongly today.

What is clear from all those earlier Islamists’ work and that of their successors, such as Hassan al-Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood and Sayyid Qutb its most influential leader who was executed (and hence martyred) for treason by Nasser in 1966, is that the division of religion and politics in the Islamic world is an essentially false one – be it at either the personal or state level. Moreover, the core, and unresolved, issue is as pertinent now as it was then: how to reconcile ‘modernity’, in the form of western-led industrialization, and its underlying secular political and economic systems and institutions, with the fundamental beliefs and tenets of Islam. The tasks of both current Islamist political leaders and of analysts who seek to understand them have changed little over two hundred years. The crucial variable is a political environment that has transformed previously disenfranchised Islamist ‘actors’ into national leaders on a scale ‘Abdou and his colleagues would have barely thought possible.

DEFINING MODERN ISLAMISM

The definitional task is complex: modern Islamists occupy a broad spectrum of political, ideological and social strata. In confronting the challenge, an understanding of where and how modern Islamists draw their legitimacy, strength and popularity from provides a useful departure point. In many cases, the success of modern Islamism has had as much to do with the underlying realities of the environments in which it has developed than with its relative strengths or ability to offer real, enduring solutions to present day issues. A number of contributing factors highlighted below are far from an exhaustive list and demonstrate the myriad network of pressures and actors at work.

- **Ideological:** Islamists benefit from growing religiosity amongst populations, a rejection of modernity in the form of western-based secularism that many identify as the cause of their own suffering and troubles (for example, in propping up corrupt, kleptocratic regimes).

- **Socioeconomic:** The divergence of modern Arab societies drives the disillusioned and disenfranchised into faith-based solutions to their predicaments. Islam enshrines socialist concepts of social justice that inevitably draw the impoverished.

- **Political:** Islamists have historically provided the only opposition to former regimes. Islamist parties currently represent the most definitive alternative for people wishing to distance themselves as far as possible from previous rulers. For Islamist groups originally founded in opposition to foreign occupation, nationalist appeal is still strong; popular anti-western sentiments elide easily with them.
Logistical: Islamist groups are the most organized, staffed, funded, disciplined political actors in town. Their history of providing welfare and social services via mosque and madrassah networks provides unparalleled access to the ‘grassroots’ and enables them to motivate large, existing constituencies.

Socio-intellectual: Modern Arab secular thought, academic scholarship and political philosophy has been suffocated into virtual extinction by authoritarian regimes; a dearth of intellectual bulwarks to confront Islamist ideologies has left the path wide open. On a broader level, systems of education in the Arab world have not equipped populations with the ability for critical thought. There is no secular political philosophy at either the intellectual or popular levels to offer an alternative to Islamist ideas.

In our consequent efforts to define and understand the movement, perhaps the most obvious distinction to be made is between what can be approximately termed ‘indigenous’ versus ‘global’ strands of Islamism. On the one hand, certain Islamist movements have grown organically out of endogenous societies in response to the needs and realities of the people and also political contexts, such as European colonialism as noted above. The conservative nature of these ‘indigenous’ groups and movements arguably has as much to do with underlying social and cultural realities and traditions as it does religious ideology, whilst their political goals are primarily rooted in ‘local’ issues, specific to their nation and people, ahead of any greater pan-Islamic world ambitions. The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, and its offshoots – most notably Hamas in Palestine, are the obvious examples.

Alternatively, modern day Salafism, whilst its origins trace back to indigenous movements of the Arabian Peninsula in the form of Wahhabism founded in the late 18th century, has taken on a far more ‘globalized’ nature, as French academic Olivier Roy convincingly argues in his work Globalized Islam. Today’s Salafist answer to ‘Abdou’s challenge of reconciling Islam with modernity is to reject all modern secular ideologies, along with ‘western’ political and economic concepts in favour of a strict emulation of the earliest days of Islam, applying the unadulterated beliefs and practices of the Prophet Mohammad and his followers to all aspects of private and public life, as far as the modern world allows. As an imported, hybrid and often alien phenomenon in most countries it strips away national identity, culture, history and traditions, both secular and religious, in favour of a standardized, international brand of Islam that its adherents argue is therefore universal, accessible and ‘purist’, though its critics charge with being a nihilistic, absolutist anachronism.

Whilst the indigenous Islamists’ appeal to notions of nationalism, shared heritage and community remains strong in countries such as Egypt where nationalist and Islamist politics are historically intertwined, the more radical Salafist movements have been gaining ground in recent decades. Egyptian politics has not only become less secular, but Islamist politics has become more radical and less inherently "Egyptian." There are a number of explanations for this trend:

- large numbers of mostly Egyptian migratory workers directly exposed to Salafism, primarily in Saudi Arabia, have returned home to spread its practices;

- the massive increase in funding for Salafist movements, funded by oil revenues, from the late 1970s onwards;

- a deterioration in Egypt’s mainstream religious institutions -- most notably Al Azhar University, which was once the preeminent global seat of Islamic learning -- has paved the way for the rise of foreign Islamist ideologies;
- Nasser’s campaign against Egyptian Islamists followed by their systematic persecution after Sadat’s assassination drove many to seek shelter with Salafi sympathizers;

- finally, in the wake of current political upheavals, the more radical visions offered by Salafists are challenging both secular and moderate indigenous Islamist opponents alike by appealing to the weakest in society – offering succour against the powerful, and hinting at the failure of mainstream Islamists to distance themselves with sufficient piety from the trappings of the west.

Additionally, divides between moderate Muslim Brotherhood and more radical Salafist groups have become increasingly blurred and considerable overlaps exist in both ideology and membership. Despite their internationalist origins, Salafists are pragmatically assuming more indigenous, locally-orientated dynamics, as evidenced by the Al Nour Party in Egypt appealing directly to the needs and concerns of local communities foremost, setting aside loftier ideological rhetoric as they do so. Determining where one group stops and the other begins has become an increasingly difficult task.

**DRAWING THE POLITICAL DIVIDING LINES**

Consequently, from the point of view of western governments’ options for engaging (or not) with an Islamist-dominated political environment there arises two key, yet deeply divisive questions. Firstly, where and how does one draw the line between these different types of Islamist, in terms of what may be deemed ‘acceptable’ or ‘unacceptable’? And secondly, do we even know for sure what modern Islamists are trying to achieve, politically or otherwise? Indeed, one may ask – do they know for sure?

Some observers argue that Islamists of every stripe share a common goal in the establishment of fundamentalist Islamic states and ultimately a new caliphate, and should be treated the same no matter what their origins, means of achieving that goal, or other policy positions (e.g. on education, the economy) may be. Seemingly moderate, measured policies have an underlying ideological impetus that is dangerous to western interests and should not be countenanced – essentially the ‘wolf is sheep’s clothing’ analogy. Equally, a pervading Islamist ‘sustaining environment’, whilst itself may be ostensibly moderate, would likely permit more extreme, insidious forms of Islamism to exist and flourish on the fringes. However, critics of this approach argue that it risks a lack of nuance that lumps all groups together and alienates potential Islamist partners more amenable to maintaining reasonable relations with the west.

Therefore, how does one make a clear distinction between groups and parties – the more extremist versus the moderate, or in political terms for western governments, between the palatable and the unacceptable? This was previously much easier when groups were only social phenomena and non-political organizations, as western governments could choose to ignore or engage with whomever they wanted. But these groups are now elected parties of government, with serious ambitions for long-term leadership.

At this stage, we cannot be 100% sure that even the most moderate Islamists’ goals, as yet untried and untested, may not ultimately be detrimental to their home states, to western interests, to international relations, global trade and security. Can we therefore reconcile engagement with groups that espouse vehemently anti-western policies and support domestic policies that are anathema to our own – for example on homophobia, status of women and minorities, freedom of religious beliefs, or threaten international security – for example on the status of relations with Israel?
DOMESTIC POLITICAL SCENARIOS

BUSINESS AS USUAL WITH THE BROTHERHOOD

Two years after Mubarak fell, little has changed at the core of Egypt’s establishment. Many aspects of Egyptian society (family, workplace, schools, mosque, church, etc) remain organized along deeply entrenched autocratic patriarchal structures and systems of patronage. If political systems are representative products of the societies they govern, it remains to be seen how real democratic political development will fare as long as such social norms endure. Nowhere is the sense of enduring authoritarianism more noticeably evident than in the current Muslim Brotherhood government. Before the Arab Spring, the Muslim Brotherhood profited considerably from its position as a foil to Mubarak’s over-zealous security apparatus. Their popularity could be won simply through their embodiment of a put-upon yet defiant victim. Now they are facing the realities of sustaining that popularity through successful government and national leadership, they have quickly began to falter.

The grim reality is that President Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood government have offered little departure from the authoritarian attitude and approach of their predecessors. They are, after all, products of the same system. The Brotherhood’s determination to maintain a familiar, authoritarian stranglehold on the political process has been evidenced by President Morsi’s designation of the Shura Council (Upper House) of parliament to act as his biddable, legislative rubber-stamp, along with his forcing through of Egypt’s latest constitution via a series of blunt political actions that provoked the widespread protests and violent clashes outside the presidential palace in Cairo and in other cities in December 2012. More sinisterly, the Muslim Brotherhood is now employing its own, armed thugs to violently confront and disperse protesters, ironically borrowing the brutal, last resort tactics of the Mubarak regime.

The political modus operandi of the Brotherhood -- in terms of consolidations of power, the distribution of wealth and favours, networks of patronage, and reluctance to engage with other political actors -- is equally hobbling political progress and development. Many observers now perceive a power grab by the new Islamist ruling elite who are seeking to transfer power, along with financial and business interests into the hands of allies and associates. Meanwhile, sweeping reappointments of the leadership roles at state-owned newspapers and banks, along with an ongoing crackdown on independent media and free press, further highlights the determination of Egypt’s new Islamist rulers to weave their tentacles of control across all pillars of the state.

THE GENERATIONAL CHALLENGE

The increasingly critical generational divide in modern Egyptian society was thrown into sharp relief during the Uprising two years ago, and remains an ever-present reminder of the country’s most pressing challenges. Clinging on to a past version of both their country and the wider world, Egypt’s rulers were finally confronted with the inescapable realities of modernity through its most simple, physical embodiment: demographics. Egypt’s national population has grown by 90% over 30 years, from approximately 45million to 85million, with a ‘youth bulge’ that has left 50% of the population under 25 and 20% between ages 15 and 24. Official figures conservatively put youth unemployment rate to be around 25%, but this fails to take account of ‘under-employment’ – individuals working just a few hours a week in casual jobs – whilst unofficial unemployment estimates well-exceed 50%.
To many observers of Egypt’s Uprising two years ago, it quickly became apparent that the whole process was emphatically more generational than ideological. The initial shock of what happened left an entire generation of Egyptians stranded and dislocated from their children to the point that, for a brief moment, aspiring Brotherhood and even Salafi youths, along with wealthy students from the American University and Mahalla labourers’ sons found that they had far more in common with each other than they did with their own parents. Lest we forget: in the early days of the Uprising, Coptic Pope Shenouda, the Muslim Brotherhood and leaders of the main Salafist group Ansar al Sunna were united in both their denunciation of the protest movement and support for the regime. Two years on, and Egypt is yet to find a place for its 45million disillusioned and disenfranchised under 25-year-olds.

Such modern demographic pressures also highlight the huge fiscal burden of Egypt’s decades-old subsidy programme that spends around 10% of GDP on food and fuel subsidies. Moreover, Egypt is the world’s largest importer of wheat, spending approximately $5.5bn in 2011 on bread subsidies, and is a net importer of fuel. As analysts watch the value of the Egyptian pound continue to spiral to new lows against the dollar, it seems that even the slightest shock to the world financial markets or a spike in food and fuel prices could plunge Egypt into a humanitarian crisis.

Ultimately, all Islamist governments must now deal with the realities of a post-modern, globalized world. Again, the centuries old, fundamental challenge of reconciling Islam with modernity comes to the fore with even greater immediacy. If their political leadership is to succeed it must be thinking on a global level with open-minded policies that reflect a willingness to engage more broadly rather than falling back into introspective, self-deluding protectionism. Egypt in particular, and to a lesser extent Tunisia and oil-rich Libya, are not competing with themselves, but against vibrant emerging market economies for their future growth and prosperity. It remains to be seen whether any government, Islamist or otherwise, will be able to help these countries to successfully do this.

UNCERTAIN FUTURE FOR THE ISLAMISTS

If Egypt’s Islamist government continues on its current course of self-interested blundering and political mismanagement, at some point it will likely falter and fall. The Muslim Brotherhood, already having to shoulder some of the unpopularity of the government of the previous regime, are clearly struggling to deliver on their promises. They have so far been short on ideas and policies to address pressing issues such as the provision of sufficient jobs, alleviation of suffering, a sense of progress, social justice and ultimately hope for a young and impatient population. Indeed, their efforts have so far been directed at shoring up their own interests rather than tackling the country’s increasingly insurmountable social and economic realities, causing further popular resentment and disgust that they evidently are only in it for themselves, and have little care for the welfare of the country at large.

Such popular disillusionment and impatience with the apparent shortcomings of Islamist political solutions risks a vulnerable and desperate population abandoning democratic political processes in favour of more radical action. The very real prospect of the Muslim Brotherhood’s political failure leaves open at least the possibility of an ensuing battle for ownership of Egypt’s revolution, as a swing to more radical solutions offered by well-supported and motivated Salafist forces is met by fierce resistance from their secularist opponents. Such a confrontation would threaten to throw the country into levels of violence and chaos that would begin to look more like civil war than a people’s revolution. Alternatively, a degree of economic meltdown may supersede political developments and precipitate what analysts are calling a ‘hunger revolution’. This potentially entails, to a greater or lesser extent, a period of anarchy, social upheaval, and socioeconomic class-based violence.
THE MILITARY AS RELUCTANT GUARANTOR

At some point in the future, should Egypt’s political process disintegrate thus threatening a descent into mass-scale unrest and violence, it is likely that the military will reluctantly step in to save the day in protecting the country’s stability and security. Similarities to the 20th Century Turkish model of the military as grand protector ex machina have not been lost to many Egyptians both in favour of and against this prospect. The country would once again be returned to the far-from-ideal and yet relatively secure state of a military dictatorship.

However, there is one possible caveat to the military’s unshakeable paramountcy: as with most of the country, internal divisions, particularly along ideological and generational lines, exist. Two years ago, some junior officers publicly defected to join the revolutionaries. Equally, analysts are aware that Islamist influences have inevitably penetrated not only the rank-and-file but also the officer class. Whilst the institution remains so opaque, even the most indicative quantitative data on these or other factors is unavailable. Yet in the event of a situation that pressed the army to engage in a major domestic confrontation, such conflicting loyalties and ideological persuasions could ultimately transpire as the only existential threat to the establishment.

Forced to take sides in an increasingly violent, sectarian struggle for the nation’s future, internal splits in the military organization itself may come to the fore to undermine its unity, possibly to the point of disintegration. However unlikely, if such an event could ever conceivably break the military’s long-standing cohesion, its aftermath would present the troubling prospect of who in Egypt would then pick up the pieces. In any such scenario, it appears likely that the most organized and disciplined groups – all of which are essentially religious-based – would stand the best chance of eventually assuming any degree of authority and control.

FUTURE PROSPECTS FOR REGIONAL FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY

Islamist governments are quickly transforming the realities of foreign and security policies of both Egypt and the region. Political leaders are under increasing popular domestic pressure to harden their foreign policy stance on a number of high profile issues – relations with Israel and ongoing cooperation with international counter-terrorism operations being key. This is a potential weak spot for them politically, as more radical opponents pick out easy targets, as accusations of selling out to the west, doing deals with the Zionists, and betraying the revolution seem likely to follow. Equally revolutions historically can have a tendency to take on fiercely nationalist natures at a certain point, to the point of wars being waged – France vs Britain post 1789 and Iran vs Iraq post 1979 providing historic and modern examples. Coupled with more a pronounced Islamist discourse, xenophobia and regional aggression could increase in future and make life more difficult for foreign interests – whether government, business or individuals – in the region.

Meanwhile, throughout the deeply violent course of the 2011 uprising in Egypt’s neighbour Libya, religious radicals with deep-seated anti-western backgrounds made up significant portions of western-backed opposition rebels fighting against Gaddafi’s regime. One of the most prominent figures in Libya’s post-Gaddafi political field Abdel Hakim Belhaj, a popular military leader in Tripoli and former leader of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, which waged an insurgency against Gaddafi in the 1990s, resigned his military post in the interim government last year in order to pursue a political career. While it is too early to say what Libyan Islamist political agendas will look like, particularly regarding relations with the west, Belhaj is publicly suing the UK government for alleged complicity in his rendition to Libya – the same government that helped remove the Gaddafi regime and created the opportunities Belhaj now enjoys. The broader message resonating across
the region seems to be that expecting newly empowered Islamists to automatically return their gratitude and support to western governments for ultimately coming down against former regimes is potentially naïve and misguided.

The destabilizing effects of conflict and transition in Libya upon the rest of North Africa and the ‘Sahel’ region remain as yet neither fully realized or understood, though one apparent consequence of the process has been a major surge in Islamist militant activity. Libya’s neighbours such as Niger, Mali, and Chad were major beneficiaries of bilateral trade with Libya, expat workers’ remittances, and the Gaddafi regime’s generous handouts propping up cash-strapped governments. The regional powder-keg finally erupted in Mali in January 2013 with a full-scale offensive led by international Islamist militants who have harnessed and hijacked an ongoing separatist rebellion of northern Mali’s largely nomadic Tuareg population.

Elsewhere in the region, the tragic Algerian hostage crisis in January 2013 at the In Amenas gas facility located close to the Libyan border has also highlighted the dangers of weakened central authority, loosely controlled borders, and the presence of militant Islamists eager to capitalize on the lack of security and abundance of weapons and ammunition flooding out of Libya’s arsenals. Indeed, much of the Sahel region is made up of vast tracts of ‘ungovernable’ desert and porous international borders where flows of drugs, arms and Islamist militants run.

Such regional foreign policy and security challenges provide valuable lessons for Egypt itself. The ‘ungovernable’ nature of the Sinai Peninsula bears similar characteristics to the Sahel’s deserts, and equally is not a new phenomenon. Mubarak-era Egyptian security officials often commented in private that whole tracts of the northern peninsula have been no-go areas for any government security forces for years. Local Bedouin tribes and organized groups have sustained a mostly autonomous, extra-legal existence, profiting from cross border smuggling with Gaza and Israel, drug production and trafficking, and other activities.

The Egyptian government’s clumsy security stings and mass arrests of local people, combined with decades of ostracism and denigration of Bedouin, have rendered Sinai-Cairo relations fundamentally unworkable. Since the fall of the Mubarak regime, the situation has deteriorated with local groups even more emboldened by a lapse of strength in the security services and ongoing uncertainty at leadership levels. Meanwhile, significant quantities of Libyan weapons and ammunition are continuing to find their way to Sinai. Crucially, the ungovernable nature of the Peninsula continues to attract the attention of international militant Islamists and extremist groups seeking a safe haven.

In Sinai, as in the Sahel, the immediate interests of both indigenous and international groups – whether disgruntled Bedouin or hardcore international jihadists – have clearly aligned. However, the conflation of all anti-establishment groups into a single, analytical bloc is a dangerous oversimplification of a complex problem. As with their African neighbours, Sinai’s ungoverned nomadic peoples are primarily concerned with their own existence and way of life rather than waging an ideological jihad. The repeated failure of foreign and security policies to make clear distinctions between such groups and to consequently treat them as separate threats perpetuates the likelihood of driving radicalised local recruits into the arms of jihadists rather than starving those most insidious, anti-western elements of the local support and acceptance that they need to survive.
CONCLUSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR BRITISH AND WESTERN POLICY MAKERS

THE CHALLENGES

Western governments now have little choice but to engage with democratically elected Islamists and whatever governments they form. In doing so, the fundamental challenge is to strike a pragmatic balance between on the one hand effective engagement that furthers western foreign policy and security objectives, whilst on the other avoiding domestic perceptions and accusations of essentially ‘appeasing terrorists’ and parties whose policies are anathema to current western values.

The west also faces hurdles in overcoming the longstanding, negative popular perceptions of it in the Arab world that are now reinvigorated with Islamist triumphalism. As already noted, modern Islamist movements were often founded in political opposition to foreign dominion of Muslim countries, an association that has not been forgotten. Recent military interventions in the Muslim world have done much to colour popular opinion. The perception that the ‘War on Terror’ is a war on Islam, however false, is hardwired as incontrovertible fact in many Arab Muslim societies.

Institutionally, western governments have been used to dealing with secular, military-orientated counterparts in the Arab world for decades. The most effective and enduring channels of international relations with Egypt over the years have apparently been between respective military leaders and intelligence agencies. There is little institutional experience of engaging with Islamist groups in an official, political capacity. Clientist relationships such as Saudi Arabia do not count; Turkey’s AKP is the major exception.

Equally, western governments seem handicapped by institutional timidity and a security culture that prevents them engaging at the societal level in most Muslim countries. The British Council in Cairo provides an example of our ever-lengthening retreat from open public engagement. In the last ten years the British Council has abolished its Arabic language courses that provided valuable grounds for western and Egyptian students to intermingle and exchange ideas and build relationships; concurrently, security concerns have compelled it to implement a stringent entrance policy that has severely inhibited its role as an accessible space for cross-cultural dialogue and open window on British culture. Meanwhile, no such institution even exists for our US allies.

Whilst Internet and digital based communications have a public diplomacy role, an over-emphasis and dependence on them is failing wholesale to engage the most vulnerable and critical sections of society, i.e. those who may be illiterate (40% of population in Egypt), have no access to Internet (80% of population in Egypt), and are the most likely targets for extremist Islamist organizations.

THE RISKS

The assumption of political leadership by Islamist groups and parties creates a number of political risks for western governments seeking to understand and engage with the Middle East’s new political order.

Anti-Islamic narratives that already held considerable traction in certain mainstream western media and political discourse have surged when faced with the spectre of Islamist-led states. As alarmist commentary feeds a prevalent ‘fear’ narrative amongst western voting publics and also provides
Muslim populations with evidence of the west’s hostility to them, the risk is that broad, populist generalisations will drown out the nuance and complexity needed to engage with the new regional realities. The conflation of all Islamists – whether moderate ‘liberals’ who have been forced out of the Muslim Brotherhood or hard core militant Salafis – into a homogenous core of anti-western, bearded misogynists will rapidly erode western governments’ room to manoeuvre in successfully navigating and engaging with them.

Meanwhile within Muslim countries, at the popular level such a scenario plays into the hands of radical Islamists who are already expert at exploiting people’s fear and anger against a malign, anti-Muslim west, whilst at the political level it also risks driving potential moderate Islamist allies into the arms of more extremist factions.

A damaging cycle of mutual alienation, fear and distrust, in light of the reality that Islamism will likely be a predominant political force in the Middle East for the immediate (though not necessarily long term) future, risks amplifying tensions that feed extremist and confrontational visions of East-West relations at the cost of more resilient and pragmatic paths.

Finally, we should resist the temptation to do nothing, to step back and gamble on the chances that the Islamist forces will eventually implode. Whilst the future prospects of Egypt’s current Islamist government appear gloomy at best, what would happen next in the case of its failure matters to both Britain and the global community. In the face of growing instability, there may come a time when the guarantee of Egypt’s military safety net will not be so sturdy.

Such worst-case scenarios for Egypt and the Arab Spring have regularly been dismissed as ‘excessively pessimistic’ by excitable, rose-tinted media coverage over the last two years, yet events have proven them to be accurate. Western governments ought to be countenancing the real prospects of further, more serious crises unfolding and having at least some contingencies in place.

THE OPPORTUNITIES

A window is currently open for western governments to reset their relations with the Arab Muslim world. A willingness to engage on an equitable, mutually-interested basis with new political leaderships and to identify shared goals could begin to redraw the client-patron arrangements, exemplified by EU grants and US subsidy programmes, that ultimately have sowed so much resentment and yet achieved so little in the region.

Such an opportunity could be used to sincerely hold future international partners to account in their commitment to building free, fair and open societies and representative systems of government. In doing so, western governments should set non-negotiable parameters for cooperation with Islamist political leaderships that establish how serious they are in pursuing courses of moderation and inclusivity that acknowledge international conventions on issues from human rights to free trade.

While engaging with Islamist counterparts on potentially problematic issues, emphasis on the more practical considerations of competency and workability rather than a preoccupation with ideological conflicts would help to recast issues such as the role of women in the workplace, laws that may hinder economic growth (for example in tourism), and human rights as primarily concerns over good, effective government rather than questions over their religious or conservative character.
Finally, there is an opportunity to distinguish between the broad spectrum of Islamist groups, and to marginalize and counter the most radical and anti-western Islamist groups in their own countries and amongst their own constituencies. This could be attempted through balancing support for moderate, competent political forces of all ideological persuasions and allowing for the creation of political spaces and opportunities that expose the significant shortcomings and incompetence of certain Islamist groups that have so far been untested both at home and abroad.

In the face of severe and pressing political challenges amidst restive and vulnerable populations, the more radical Islamist policies pushing negative, destructive agendas could be revealed as being dislocated from and detrimental to the basic, popular needs of their populations.
CHARLES HOLMES

Charles Holmes is a Middle East, foreign policy and security analyst, providing research and advisory to governments, institutions and the private sector. From 2003-2011 he spent a number of years working with the highest levels of the Egyptian government, bearing witness to the most dramatic political events of the era, up to and including the fall of the Mubarak regime.

Charles has previously worked on the US government’s counter-terrorism and counter-radicalisation programmes in Kabul, Afghanistan, Tampa FL and Washington DC. Whilst in Washington he also ran a ground-breaking, non-partisan advocacy programme providing foreign policy-making support to US Congress. Charles writes extensively for academic journals, risk advisory and foreign affairs publications and has been a guest lecturer speaker at think tanks and universities in Britain and the United States.

He holds a Masters in Middle East Politics from London School of Oriental and African Studies. His 2006 graduate thesis on political protest and online activism in the Arab world was a prescient exposition of the seismic forces and events that are now shaping the region.