



MAGHREB ROUNDTABLE

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SPEAKERS

Dr. Michael Willis is the H.M. King Mohammed VI Fellow in Moroccan and Mediterranean Studies at the Middle East Centre at St. Antony's College, Oxford. His research interests focus on the politics, modern history and international relations of the Maghreb. He is author of *The Islamist Challenge in Algeria: A Political History* and is currently writing a book on the comparative politics of Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco. Willis spent seven years at Morocco's Al Akhawayn University in Ifrane where he taught political science.

Dr. Malika Zeghal is Associate Professor of the Anthropology and Sociology of Religion at the University of Chicago's Divinity School. She is the recent author of *Les islamistes marocains: le défi à la monarchie (Moroccan Islamists: The Challenge to the Monarchy)*, which is currently being translated into English. She is particularly interested in the institutionalization of Islam in the Muslim world, with an emphasis in the Maghreb and Egypt. Zeghal completed her Ph.D. at the Institut d'Études Politiques in Paris. ■

DEMOCRATS OR AUTOCRATS?: ISLAMISTS IN NORTH AFRICAN POLITICS

Asked whether Islamist political leaders were at heart democrats or autocrats, University of Chicago Professor Malika Zeghal said, "They can be either, depending on the constraints." Since governments tightly regulate the political environment, she said, those same governments have the power to shape the direction of Islamist politics. Oxford Professor Michael Willis went further, arguing that signs of authoritarian tendencies in Islamist movements partly reflect the fact that they are working within authoritarian systems themselves.

Zeghal and Willis made their comments on November 18 to members of CSIS's Maghreb Roundtable, a new initiative at CSIS to draw attention to trends and events in North Africa that are of strategic interest to the United States. Their discussion helped inform an ongoing debate between those who argue that including Islamist politicians in Arab politics will nurture democratic transitions and those who argue that excluding Islamists protects those transitions from being hijacked by essentially authoritarian groups.

The bulk of the scholars' discussion centered on Islamists in Morocco and Algeria, yet they argued that their findings applied to mainstream Islamist groups across the Middle East. Their talks focused primarily on parties that participate actively in parliamentary politics, such as the Reform Party and the Movement for a Peaceful Society (MSP) in Algeria, and the Justice and Development Party (PJD) in Morocco. While the parties differ on many issues, they are similar in that they all seek a greater role for religion in public life, they are hostile to secularism, and they employ the language of reform and democracy to promote their agendas.

Zeghal observed that "all of the regimes of the Maghreb regulate Islam and have a discourse with Islamists." Rather than seek to stamp out Islam, regional governments seek to negotiate agreements with religious leaders that allow for some independence in exchange for support for the ruling powers. Morocco is an exceptional case in this regard not only because the monarchy is rooted in Islam—one of the king's titles is "Commander of the Faithful"—but because it has demonstrated a greater willingness than its neighbors to foster a multi-party system. In that system, the king rules above the parties, which compete with each other but do not challenge the legitimacy of the king. She suggested that republican systems can be more difficult to liberalize because the parties compete among themselves without an external arbiter.

Historically, Moroccan King Hassan II pursued a strategy of divide and rule over the parties, and that approach extended to the sphere of Islam. In the early 1990s, however, the palace altered

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THE MAGHREB ROUNDTABLE SERIES

The CSIS Middle East Program launched the Maghreb Roundtable to examine the strategic importance of a broad range of social, political, and economic trends in North Africa and to identify opportunities for constructive U.S. engagement. The roundtable defines the Maghreb as Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, and Mauritania. The roundtable convenes monthly, assembling a diverse group of regional experts, policymakers, academics, and business leaders seeking to build a greater understanding of the complexities of the region. Topics for discussion will include the role of Islamist movements in politics, the war on terror, democratization and the limits of civil society, the strategic importance of North African energy, the effects of emigrant communities in Europe, and prospects for greater regional integration. ■

its strategy, allowing for expanded political participation across the political spectrum and enhanced transparency; the monarchy also demonstrated its willingness to accept the results of elections. This expansion created an opening for politico-religious movements such as the PJD.

The Moroccan government and Moroccan Islamists came together because of several factors. The most important was the Algerian experience, in which the sudden rise of Islamist parties provoked a harsh government backlash and a bloody conflict that resulted in more than 100,000 deaths. Moroccan Islamists grew more cautious and moderated their discourse in response to the horrors next door. Growing socio-economic troubles and popular discontent as a result of the 1991 Gulf War also caused the Moroccan government to seek outlets for mounting pressures.

When the PJD contested parliamentary elections in 1997, it won 14 seats. The victory energized the party's leaders, and, according to Willis, they engaged the population more than any other party. In the 2002 elections, the PJD tripled its representation, winning 42 seats in parliament. Zeghal characterized that victory as a "political tsunami." She asserted that the palace and the PJD negotiated the party's actual representation in parliament.

Zeghal dismissed charges that the PJD merely represented the "Islamists of the palace." While there certainly are regime loyalists in the party, the PJD has its hard-liners as well. This ideological diversity within the movement is precisely one of the factors that makes it difficult to assess the party's commitment to democratic principles.

According to Zeghal, circumstances and constraints—mostly determined by the palace—will determine how the

PJD evolves. The PJD is a mosaic of inconsistent ideologies with competing leaders and positions. This diversity leads to party dynamism, but it also leads to competition and growing tension within the movement. The movement's future as a unified political party is in no way assured, in her view.

While the PJD has accepted the rules of the system, a larger Islamist movement in Morocco, *al-Adl wal Ihsan*

("Justice and Charity") has remained outside of formal politics. Willis asserted that *al-Adl wal Ihsan* does not necessarily have a more radical ideology than the PJD, but the government bars it from competition because it rejects the legitimacy of the monarchy.

The scholars agreed that broadening political processes to include more Islamist political movements was a positive trend. Zeghal argued that the most effective way to keep the system open was to clarify the boundaries of permissible political action. In her mind, the starkly clear character of red lines under the late King Hassan II was constructive, and the ambiguity of rules in the current environment is a dangerous trend that breeds uncertainty.

Willis argued that the West needed to engage with Islamists on a host of issues including women's rights, poverty, and corruption. In his view, such engagement will both strengthen moderate forces in those parties and help undermine the spread of more radical and militant Islamist groups.

Overall, Willis saw Islamists' growing interest in coalition politics as an important indicator of their future intentions, including a willingness to share power. Further, he estimated that a long-term process of participation would moderate Islamists' views. Nevertheless, he added, "existing regimes in the region continue to show no real indication they'd be willing to share, let alone grant political power to, any other force, including the Islamists." The problem of limited political participation is not restricted to Islamists, he judged, yet continuing to bring Islamists and others into competitive politics will help promote moderation and allow all parties to work toward a more stable future. ■ -HM 11/22/05

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The CSIS Middle East Program

JON B. ALTERMAN, Director

HAIM MALKA, Fellow

EDWARD M. GABRIEL, Visiting Fellow

MICHAEL BALZ, Research Assistant/Program Coordinator

NICHOLAS INGACIOLA AND CHOR LI, Interns

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