

## Changing Stripes?

### Islamic Parties and the Idea of Moderation

#### CSIS Congressional Forum on Islam

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“Islamist actors may have entered the formal political system in order to change it, but once they joined the system, they ended up being changed by it themselves,” argued Professor Carrie Rosefsky Wickham. The author of *Mobilizing Islam: Religion, Activism and Political Change in Egypt* (Columbia University Press, 2002), Wickham spoke with Congressional staffers on January 18, 2008 as part of the CSIS Congressional Forum on Islam.

Wickham was considerably more circumspect than Robert Leiken and Steven Brooke, who argued a year ago in *Foreign Affairs* that the Muslim Brotherhood’s embrace of democracy and growing influence justified a dialogue with the United States. Wickham would not go so far as to say Islamist groups were moderate, but she argued instead that cautious dialogue and interaction with Islamist groups can help moderate them over time and is in U.S. interests.

She argued that at the heart of the debate is the disagreement about “the capacity of Islamic ‘fundamentalist’ groups for self-transformation.” Her principal object of inquiry was the Muslim Brotherhood, a group founded in Egypt in 1928. From its earliest days, the Brotherhood supported social service projects as a way toward establishing an Islamic society based on Shari’a law. At the same time, elements were engaged in violent action against the Egyptian government, Jews, and British interests in Egypt. Today, leaders have not only begun to renounce violence publicly but have also started to involve themselves in local electoral contests and to establish quasi-political parties. While the drive to hasten the spread of Shari’a law remains central to their ambitions, it is no longer central to their rhetoric. While skeptics see this shift as false moderation, or as an example of *taqiyya* (dissimulation), others take these indicators as a sign of real change. Wickham cautioned against choosing either position, and instead advocated an appreciation for the dynamism and adaptability of Islamist political movements.

Wickham put forward six propositions that arose from her twenty years of research into Islamic political movements. The first is that Islamist movements have had to alter both their rhetoric and behavior as they have sought to compete in electoral politics. She called this softening “pragmatic de-radicalization.” Second, increased exposure to and cooperation with secular opposition groups has led many Islamists to embrace concepts of citizenship and pluralism that had been anathema to an earlier generation of activists. Third, there is huge diversity in what Islamists believe and say, rendering efforts to uncover their “true colors” an exercise in frustration. Fourth, there is greater unity on some issues—such as the primacy of the Quran and the traditions of the Prophet, patriarchy, the legitimacy of resistance to foreign domination, and others—than on others, such as issues of individual citizens’ rights. Fifth, recent external events have made many Islamists feel besieged, and those events have weakened an impulse for self-criticism and reform that had been evident a few years ago. Finally, groups need not be moderate for the United States to benefit from engagement with them.

She argued that participation in politics and a search for legitimacy among broad publics make radicalism a less appealing option. Wickham cited the example of the Justice and Development Party in Morocco as exhibiting the “highest levels of professional development... (whether with) respect to the professional socialization of its leaders, the formalization of internal decisionmaking procedures, or the accountability of its representatives in parliament and local government to the party leadership.”

Wickham argued that it is unlikely that any of these groups will actually accede to real power, because Middle Eastern authoritarian governments have little interest in allowing them to do so. That being said, she suggested that the key question for the West should be how to help create conditions under which the Brotherhood “is likely to further deepen its commitment to pluralism, democracy, and peaceful co-existence with the West.” She said there are several reasons why the United States should engage with Islamist parties such as the Brotherhood. First, the United States can improve its understanding of the Islamist point of view. Second, the opportunity may arise for establishment of personal relationships conducive to confidence-building. Third, the United States will have the ability to explain its policies and possibly gain “some margin of influence in the future”. With the proliferation of media sources and interpretations, a foreign policy message is easily lost or distorted. Because leaders of Islamic parties are “walking a tightrope”, carefully not alienating conservative leaders from within while trying to win support from outside critics, the United States should pursue careful engagement through low-level and informal talks.