Anabaptized ‘moderate’: ‘moderate Islamists,’ American think tanks, and the roadmap to ‘the Jasmine Revolution’ and ‘the Arab Spring’

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Abstract

Since January 2011, the Tunisian uprisings and their aftermath have generated a spate of analyses and attempts to historicize what seemed to many in the academic circles elusive moments. In addition to chronicles, flows of books, anthologies, dispatches, and other edited mementos historicizing the uprisings have sought to embrace the complexity of what occurred and its ramifications. However, the majority of these insider and outsider accounts on the subject tend to corroborate to what has become a global romance of a ‘revolution without leaders’- without philosophers, further tickling a luring sense of “Tunisian exceptionalism.” Ironically, the spread of popular uprisings in neighboring countries turned what was (mis)taken for a Tunisian distinctive feature into a common pattern cutting across the region. Still, it has remained until now critically under-examined and unquestioned, which has, in my opinion, contributed to hamper realistic assessment and accurate reading of the Tunisian experience and its outcomes. This paper aims to question the myth of a “revolution without philosophers.” It attempts to examine one of the many missing elements of the 2011 scenario by delineating the profile of its overlooked omniscient “Philosophers” and tracing the broad outlines of the ideological apparatus informing the 2011 events and shaping their aftermath. First, it delves into the Western ideological roots of moderate Islamism.” Borrowing a Western lens, the paper tries to draw a portrait of the new “ruling elite”-the so-called “moderate Islamists,” US alternative “reliable interlocutors” to the falling “secular dictators,” and to depict the concomitant democracy promotion moral canopy on which the new strategic thinking rests. Second, it studies the broad terms of the compact made between these new strategic actors and US policy strategists and policy makers. Third, it will provide a sketch of the roadmap towards implementing the new strategic plans for the region as laid down by US think tanks and highlight the shaky foundations of the democratization project. The paper concludes with an assessment of the strategic project and demonstrates the shortsightedness of its philosophers and actors.

Keywords: Moderate Islam, Islam and Democracy, think tanks, Arab spring, leaderless Revolution.
Background

In December 2010, Tunisian citizens took to the streets following the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi, a produce vendor from the south-central town of Sidi Bouzid. The ensuing protests over rampant corruption, lack of economic opportunity, and police violence spread across the impoverished south and moved northward before reaching the capital, Tunis. An explosive mix of socio-economic problems and widespread and deepening political grievances constituted a common causal thread that drove Tunisians to Avenue Habib Bourguiba on January 14th, 2011 to demand political liberties, basic freedoms, and dignity.

Despite the harsh persecution that the Islamists suffered under the Ben Ali regime, the uprisings were neither initiated, nor guided, nor were they primarily expressed in religious terms. The uprisings’ brandished slogans were marked by the absence of Islamic ideology. Nor did they reflect alternative ideologies. On the whole they appeared post-ideological, civic, and universal in nature. The civic nature of the demonstrations and the un-Islamist leanings of most the dramatis personae, including the predominantly uncovered Tunisian women, took the world in general and the West in particular by storm, challenging old paradigms and mindsets regarding the Middle East. They highlighted the inadequacy of received wisdoms about the Middle East that proceed from the premise of some sort of Arab or Muslim exceptionalism. The Tunisian uprisings des-sacralized the region, questioning the predominant role attributed to religion, where ‘Islamic’ is applied to every aspect of culture and society, including the immunity Muslim/Arab societies to waves of democratization, which have transformed other regions.

However, this de-sacralization process was short-lived. The return of Rached Ghannouchi, the spiritual leader of Ennahda, the largest Islamist movement in Tunisia, two weeks after the ouster of ben Ali, the way he was welcomed by his followers at the airport (chanting a song sung to welcome Prophet Mohammed to Medina), and the round-the-clock worldwide media coverage his return received were reminiscent of the return of the Khomeini from exile after the Iranian Revolution at almost the same time in 1979. However, the new Islamic leader, with his trimmed beard and Western suit (without a tie), was marketed to Tunisians and to the rest of the world as the harbinger of “moderate Islam,” significantly marking the theoretical decline of one Islamist model -Iran’s-(1) and the ascent of another-Turkey’s. Ghannouchi, who claimed his ideas inspired the Turkish AKP, as well as an increasing number of Ennahda leaders, who used to be in exile or underground before January 14th, invaded the Tunisian public square overnight. They upheld the AKP as a useful model, claiming the civic nature of their party and boosting, as the most powerful and organized party, that they would prove that “Islam” and “democracy” are not antithetical.

A pattern seemed in the making across the region as Islamists came to power in all the neighboring countries that were swept by similar swift downfalls of their autocratic secular leaderships following popular mass demonstrations. Surprisingly, the West, the US in particular, welcomed the rise of Islamism in the region. Having for long observed a double standard in its relations with most Arab countries by turning a blind eye to internal repression, especially of
Islamists in the name of fighting US-led global war on terrorism, the Obama administration and Western governments and media lauded the rise of Islamists to power. Ghannouchi, the leader of the major Islamist party in Tunisia, who was considered for more than two decades as “a terrorist” by US authorities and denied entry visa to the US, was hailed as “a moderate Muslim.”

His first visit to the US in November 2011, soon after his party’s electoral victory and 22 days before the first-Islamist led government was formed, was widely covered by US media and scholars, some of whom described it as “a sign of the times,” (Lynch, 2011) ushering in a new era in US relations with “moderate Islamists.” In geostrategic terms, the latter represent the “new credible interlocutors,” upon whom lies the historical mission of helping the US establish “genuine” democracies in the Muslim world. Yet, this and subsequent visits of Ghannouchi to the US, which speak volumes about the newly role assigned by traditional Western global players to the Islamists in the MENA region, went unnoticed by the Tunisian media and a political class traumatized and frustrated by the unexpected landslide victory of the Islamist deserters (expats by choice), who avoided fighting the dictatorship from within and through legal means for more than two decades.

Ghannouchi was in Washington in November 2011 at the invitation of Foreign Policy (2), after being named one of its Top 100 Global Thinkers. His books were written for the most part in Arabic, none of which had been translated into English before 2011. Most of them were written in the 80s, 90s, and early 2000 reflecting the same theocratic Islamist fundamentals of his godfathers. Certainly, he was not invited as one of the Islamist Ulamas who had broken new grounds in the stagnant Islamist tradition of Ijtihad/exegesis as this was the topic of none of the meetings he attended. He rather appeared at a wide range of think tanks, such as the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, and met with a range of U.S. government officials, journalists, and policy analysts from the Brookings Institution, Saban Center for Middle East Policy, and the Center for Foreign Relations, all of which are American (pro-Israeli) think tanks whose main mission is to educate American politicians about the Middle East to influence their policies towards the promotion of US-Israeli interests in the region. On November 30th, 2011, Ghannouchi participated in a round table discussion at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP). The WINEP was founded in 1985 by Martin Indyk, a founder of a research institute inside AIPAC (the most influential Israeli Lobby known as the American Israeli Public Affairs Committee), a former (Jewish) ambassador of the USA in Israel before he became vice-president of the Brookings Institute. Indyk, himself would invite Gahnnouchi to the Saban Center for Middle East Policy on May 31st, 2013 (3 months after the assassination of opposition leader Chokri Belaid) to give a talk about “Tunisian democracy” under “moderate” Islamism. The Saban Center, named after the Israeli-American Billionaire Haim Saban, is a research center that was set up by the Brookings Institution to study US role in the Middle East.

Following the foot ideological trails of the Top 100 thinkers who figured on the same list with his name, such as Barack Obama, Dick Cheney, Ben Shalom Bernanke, Condoleezza Rice, Christine Lagarde, Recep Erdogan, Bernard-Henry Levy, John McCain, and Meir Dagan (Head of the Mossad), Ghannouchi took the freedom to cherish the beginning of the fall of the
nation states and announce the impending fall of the monarchies in the Muslim world in 2012. With the benediction of the ventriloquists of the new World order and the project for the Greater Middle East and with the applause of the US centers of strategic studies, Ghannouchi, a pawn in a complex game, hailed the inevitable change in the political map of the MENA region in his speech at WINEP. Of course, Ghannouchi did not openly define the alternative form of governance that would rise on the wreck of post-world war I map drawn by the then rising empires. That was part of the secret deal between the “moderate Islamists” and the third millennium’s global powers that he thanked for “supporting the Arab Spring,” the kickoff leading up to the fulfillment of a promised new form of governance. However, this new form of governance did not remain secret for long. On the eve of Gahnnouchi’s speech in Washington, his party’s prime minister-designate Hammadi Jebali, a close friend of John McCain (another Top 100 Thinker) and one of the engineers of the “moderate-Islamist”-American deal forged inside Tunisia in 2006 (as proven through Wikileaks (3) US embassy cables), declared at a cross-Islamist-spectrum popular meeting that “[w]e are in the sixth caliphate, God willing.” He expressed his staunch belief that Tunisia was headed for a form of Islamic governance that ended in 1924 with the abolition of the Ottoman caliphate. At long last, it seems that the global powers fulfilled the promise they had made to the Islamists at the heyday of the global recruitment campaign of the Jihadists (1980s) who fought on the side of the US and helped bring about the resounding defeat of the Soviet forces in 1989 and set a landmark towards the emergence of a unipolar world order in the early 1990s.

Jebali felt empowered by Ghannouchi’s visit to the US to pay the oath of allegiance to the superpower and to renew the terms of the compact that had been made in the previous decade between worldwide representatives of the Islamic trend, called “moderate Muslims,” and the US decision makers with the mediation of the pro-Israeli American think tanks. As will be analyzed later in this work, the latter had designed a well-knit road map to convince US decision makers to withdraw their support from the worn-out secular dictatorships and to rely on “moderate Islamists,” who they presented as America’s new “reliable interlocutors” who are willing to offer unconditioned support for the implementation of US pending strategic plans in the region as long as they secure US support to reach and remain in power. (4)

Congress’s standing ovation for the Tunisian people and Western governments’ unanimous acceptance of Islamist control of the state apparatuses in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya aside, the unanimous global adoption of the brand mark “moderate Islamists” to refer to this rising category of Islamists in academic circles, media outlets, and social networks casts a shadow of doubt on the spontaneity of the so-called “spontaneous leaderless revolution.” A Masternarrative was unfolding and it is only by deciphering the enigmatic concept “Moderate Islamists,” which refers to the chief beneficiaries of the whole process, rather than focusing on the identities of the actors who helped stage the scene that the plots and subplots of this Masternarrative can be unraveled. Unfortunately, the euphoria of a global public relations campaign orchestrated in the West to market the uniqueness of the elusive events of 2011 and their aftermath in the modern history of the MENA region, has mislead many Tunisian scholars and politicians across the non-Islamist ideological spectrum into the Western set-perspective
focusing on “the making of the ‘revolution’ rather than its makers. To atone for their failure to orchestrate a prerequisite intellectual “revolution” to help guide the unpredicted political one, Tunisian scholars have, for the most part, been vying to fill out academic gaps about “the making of the Revolution” by producing flows of works on such “revolutionary actors” as the poor, the youth, the cyber-activists, the women, the middle classes, etc., rather than the real makers of the “revolutions,” understandably a role they were supposed, but missed the opportunity, to play.\(^5\)

Against this background, the second part of this work will broach an alternative perspective by attempting to dissect the theoretical (historical, geopolitical, geostrategic, and intellectual) foundations of “moderate Islamism” as a Western ideological construct.

1-The “Moderate Islamist” construct and the Empire’s ideological arsenal
   -The historical and geopolitical roots

In April 2009, speaking at the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies a few days before Obama’s first historic visit to Turkey, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan rejected attempts to call Turkey the representative of ‘moderate Islam.’ “It is unacceptable for us to agree with such a definition. Turkey has never been a country to represent such a concept. Moreover, Islam cannot be classified as moderate or not,” argued Erdoğan. (Güncelleme, 2009) Political rhetoric aside, the label was rejected because it was formulated by American policy makers to set off the rising tide of what they perceived as “radical Islamic movements.” This move started during Bill Clinton’s presidency but has reached a new ascendancy since 9/11, 2001.

The embers of Ground Zero hardly settled on 9/11 when a feverish search began throughout the US and the Muslim world for “moderate Muslims,” a minority of ‘good guys’ who would provide answers, condemn, and distance themselves from the violent acts of the opposite camp, the “Muslim extremists.” Two distinct categories of Muslims rapidly emerged: the “moderates” and “non-moderates.” The logic behind this categorization was reinforced by the two options the former US president George W. Bush gave for Muslims, “either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists.” Since then, “Moderate Muslims” has been used as a label to designate Muslims who are ‘friendly’ with the US, and “non-moderate Muslims” as a designation for Muslims who oppose the West. As such, President Bush provided Westerners with a new standardized double-dimensional lens, which is slightly different from the one that Edward Said defined as “Orientalism.” (Said, 1978) While the contemporary version of the latter lumped up all Muslims in one category and presented them as “raging terrorists” bent on plotting to threaten the security of the US, the new lens -Neo-Orientalism- distinguishes a minority of “moderates” from the rest who are not.

Like Orientalism, ‘Neo-Orientalism’\(^6\) must be analyzed within the historical, cultural, institutional, and geopolitical context in which it was constructed to provide the ideological frame that defines US new role in the world. Indeed, in their attempts to bolster the foundations of the post-Cold War world order embodied in considering the whole world as one country’s *imperium* led by the US, a corps of geopolitical strategists and liberal intellectuals have been bent on delineating the outlines of America’s new role in the world. To secure American strategic
interests in the Muslim world, contain Russian, Chinese, and Iranian influence under the cloak of US war on terrorism, and to enhance the religious identity of Israel as a Jewish state, so far surrounded by predominantly secular states, they felt the need to renew US former alliance with the Muslim world’s Islamists (Jihadists).

Forged in the late 1980s, a successful alliance between the US and Islamic Jihadist groups (the Afghan Mujahideen) represented a milestone towards the dismemberment of the USSR and the emergence of “the new world order.” However, such alliance floundered as the US invaded Iraq, built military bases in the region, and did not fulfill what Mamdani defined in Good Muslim, Bad Muslim as CIA / US promises to their Islamist allies, which consisted in helping them export the Islamic revolution of Afghanistan to the rest of the Muslim world. As Mamdani succinctly puts it,

The point was to integrate guerrilla training with the teaching of Islam and thus create “Islamic guerrillas.”...The madrassahs not only opened their doors to Islamic radicals from around the world, but also taught that the Islamic revolution in Afghanistan would be but a precursor to revolution in other Muslim-majority countries. (Mamdani, 2004:136)

However, the US did not live up to its promises and continued to support secular dictators. With the return of victorious Afghan mujahideen to their home countries along with the unremitting flow of Gulf petro-dollar, Islamic revivalist movements started gaining ground in the Muslim World in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Islamists made significant electoral gains in Egypt, Tunisia, and Algeria during that period. The latter plunged into civil war as the Algerian military annulled the elections, banned the Islamic Salvation Front which won the first round of elections in 1991 and arrested its members. Their counterparts in other Muslim countries, including Tunisia, faced the same fate.

Of these countries, Tunisia was the least to export mujahideen to Afghanistan even though leaders of the then radicalized Islamist spectrum, including Islamists from the city of Sidi Bouzid, played a key role in the recruitment campaign (Bergen, 2002). This was the case mainly because political Islam was an ideological transplant which had no socio-historical roots in the society. It was encouraged by the Bourguiba regime in the 1970s to contain a growing leftist movement, which was then perceived as an imminent threat to the regime. Yet, it turned into the most violent force threatening to destabilize the state. The movement’s (to-date unamended) 1981 founding statements did by no means offer the Tunisian society a model for a democratic alternative to the Bourguiba regime. It embraced an ideological package blending Iranian revolutionism and Muslim Brotherhood extremist methods as reflected in R. Ghannouchi’s declarations in 1979;“during this century [the fifteenth Muslim century, which was about to begin] Islam will go from defense to attack. It will reach new heights. It will be the century of the Islamic state.” (Enhaili, 2010: 396) While the confrontation between the Bourguiba regime and the Islamists led to the downfall of Bourguiba who insisted on the execution of Ghannouchi in November 1987, the post-1989-elections confrontations, (7) which put an end to the honeymoon between the Islamists and the ben Ali regime came to an end with the defeat of the Islamist camp in 1992.
The geopolitical dynamics played a determinant role in defining the outcome of the conflict in favor of the secularist camp. As he denounced US invasion of (Iraq) and Saudi Arabia for allowing the US to deploy forces and establish military bases in the lands of Islam in 1990, Ghannouchi, leading the extremist side of an already variegated Islamist spectrum, lost the logistic support of the US and the financial support of Saudi Arabia to establish the Islamic state he dreamt of. Mocking Ghannouchi’s attempt to ingratiate himself with the then US Assistant Secretary of State to get a review of a denied visa application after the end of the First Gulf War, Martin Kramer, an American-Israeli scholar, sums up some of the key factors which brought about the tragic flaw of Ghannouchi and the floundering of the promised Islamist state project in an article titled “A U.S. Visa for an Islamic Extremist?” and published by The Washington Institute for Near East Policy in June 1994. Kramer writes:

Ghannouchi also threatened the United States. Speaking in Khartoum during the crisis, he said, “There must be no doubt that we will strike anywhere against whoever strikes Iraq … We must wage unceasing war against the Americans until they leave the land of Islam, or we will burn and destroy all their interests across the entire Islamic world… Muslim youth must be serious in their warning to the Americans that a blow to Iraq will be a license to strike American and Western interests throughout the Islamic world.” […] Assuming a valid distinction can be made between Islamists who are “extremist” and “reformist,” Ghannouchi clearly belongs to the first category. (Kramer, 1994)

Ghannouchi’s miscalculated anti-Westernism left the way open for Ben Ali to court the West’s support while setting the foundations of one of the most stifling police states in the region. This was not surprising as Ben Ali, who was more likely forced to provide a presidential car to drive Ghannouchi to the Algerian borders in 1992 to live in Western exile (rather than Tunisian jails), was aware that Al-nahda was part of a broader and more complex geopolitical game, the rules of which were set by players that “the victorious” Ben Ali feared more than al-nahda. Indeed, since then, al-nahda become an offshore operation sustained by supporters in Europe and North America, where they would work their way back to power in 2011.

For more than a decade following the fall of the Soviet Union and the first Iraqi war, the US tried to maintain the status quo in the Muslim world by supporting authoritarian regimes on the belief that Islamist agenda is inimical to the West, and represents a threat to the stability of Israel. However, 9/11 changed some of the declared objectives of US foreign policy in the region. Drastic measures were taken by the Bush administration to challenge the status quo, sending alarming messages to Middle Eastern autocrats and spots of hope to the leadership of the Islamist movements who were waiting for changes in US attitude towards secular rulers to seize power. In February 2004, Al Hayat, a London-based Arabic newspaper published a White House draft titled “The Greater Middle East Initiative” aiming at democratizing the Middle East. The draft, which was meant to be presented at the G-8 meeting in June 2004, elicited angry responses from Arab leaders. As a result, it was amended into “The Broader Middle East Initiative,” declaring G8 support for political, social, and economic reform in the region in the June 2004 summit (Weisman: 2004).
Subsequent reports were issued by governmental, non-governmental, and non-profit organizations in the West, drawing attention to freedom deficit and lack of political participation in the Middle East. These include, for instance, “Freedom in the Middle East and North Africa Report” (2005) by Freedom House and UNDP’s “Arab Human Development Report 2004.” These and similar reports revealed that mainly Islamists were denied the right to political participation in the Muslim world. This was not surprising in a post-9/11 context where secular autocrats, vying for US support for their regimes, passed anti-terrorism laws which targeted mainly Islamists (America’s declared enemies) and run against international human rights standards.

Paradoxically, these violations gave a moral canopy and a declared objective- promoting democracy- to US projected geostrategic interests in the region. Washington’s avowed objective was based on the less obvious premise that lack of democracy in the region was a contributing factor to terrorism and anti-Americanism, and that if full electoral democracy in the Middle East was to be promoted, it would inevitably bring Islamist groups in droves to power. This premise may sound post-Orientalist as it recognizes a possible compatibility between Islam and democracy. However, it perpetuates Orientalist reductive clichés, which have always tended to associate all phenomena in the Muslim world with the realm of Islam. It overestimates the role of Islamist groups in the democratization process and marginalizes other indigenous social and political actors who, upon close study of Middle Eastern societies, may by far be more qualified to put their countries on the path towards democratization than the Islamists. However, the expansionist dimension of America’s version of Manifest Destiny for the 21st century, with its concomitant version of democratization, requires that the whole region be painted with the timeless Islamist brush, but with a new shade of “moderation.”

The electoral victories of the Muslim Brotherhood at the Egyptian parliamentary elections of 2005 and of Hamas at the 2006 Palestinian elections, bringing back the memory the Islamist victory in Algeria in the 1990s, helped American strategic thinkers generalize a pattern throughout the region: a second Islamist revival. Upon observation, this revival, like the previous revival, was of America’s own making. Indeed, the predominantly un-Islamist mood, which was reflected in the sympathy of the Muslim streets and mainstream Muslim clerics with the American people and their renunciation of Islamic extremism after 9/11, turned anti-American and, therefore, pro-Islamist following US invasion of Iraq in 2003. (B. Salem, 2010) This shift was reinforce by the numerous atrocities and humiliating sadistic human rights violation scandals (murder, rape, collective punishment) committed by US occupation forces against Iraqi civilians. These include the widely broadcast Abu Ghareeb jail scandal revelations (2004), and the Haditha (2005) and Falluja (2004) massacres. (9) Notorious for their extreme use of force, these atrocities dominated international headlines. They fueled an enduring Iraqi and Arab distrust of the United States and of their secular America-backed regimes that were unable to hold the US accountable for what they perceived as a war on Islam and the Muslim world.

The Muslim publics, who could not see any rational link between the regime of Saddam Hussein and Islamic terrorism, came to perceive US unilateral invasion of Iraq as a colonial war.
On Islam, a Crusade (as President Bush qualified it) aiming to tighten US firm grip on the natural resources of the region and to transplant Westernized, Israel-friendly secular regimes. Consequently, Bush’s support for autocratic secular regimes, which was marketed as the most viable strategy to help stability reign in the post-Cold War context, was perceived by the increasingly anti-American Muslim streets as support for the agents of colonialism and Zionism and the enemies of Islam. As the anti-terrorism laws adopted by these regimes under US tutelage further stifled freedoms of expression and gathering in the region, as corruption deepened, and as the repercussions of the global economic crisis, which ruthlessly hit Muslim societies, compounded the frustration of Muslim streets and their anti-Western sentiments, the once ‘unpopular’ Islamist parties popped up as an attractive alternative by brandishing Islam as the solution. In countries, like Tunisia where Islamist parties were banned and where the country’s Zaytouni Maliki Islam had kept aloof from politics, cyber-Islam and global satellite channels filled out the gap with alien, at times, extremist ideologies.

Turning to Islamism or forms of political Islam was in reality a coping strategy, a form of political romanticism which reflects a longing within wider sections of Muslim societies for an imagined pre-Islamic-fall world order which met the aspirations of Muslim societies fourteen centuries ago. It was an imaginary attempt to revive a timeless moral code which bolstered the Islamic golden age and to reproduce it in the 21st century as an antidote to the Muslim world’s repeated West-inflicted frustrations and perennial decline. By being offered forms of political Islam, Muslim societies are brought to confound the original creed (Islam) with altogether different political creeds, with origins in the 19th century, tailor-made for colonial contexts (Dreyfuss, 2005). As such, while some Muslims and Muslim countries consider forms of political Islam heretical, in Muslim societies where political Islamist movements have firm social and historical grounding due to geostrategic proximity from Western-backed political Islamisms’ custodian countries, Muslims, unaware of the historical context in which these movements appeared, tend to confuse the universal values of Islam with timely codes marketed to Muslim societies as the ‘true’ Islam. They have fallen either under the spell of US-partly forsaken Saudi Wahabi Muslim World League doctrines (which produced 9/11, al Qaeda, and the Taliban), or the competing doctrines of the US-supported, Qatar-sponsored Muslim Brotherhood’s World League of Muslim Scientists (with Al Qaradawi and Ghannouchi as key figures). The popularity of the latter as an alternative brand of political Islam marketed for the Muslim streets rose with the rise of Qatar-based Al-jazeera satellite channel with its shocking coverage of US occupation of Iraq. Such correlation explains why polls taken by Western polling agencies to gauge the spread of US-stoked new religious revivalism in the past decade focused mainly on societies where political Islamist movements have firm social and historical grounding (Tunisia was almost always excluded) to come up with the generalization that Muslim societies prefer to be ruled by Islamist parties and according to ‘sharia’ (mistaken for timeless Islam) rather than by secular regimes and secular constitutions. John Esposito and Dalia Mojahed’s analysis of the 6-year Gallup survey of the Muslim world epitomizes this trend supporting the cause of “moderate Islam” as a democratic alternative to secular dictatorships, (10) and helping define its broad outlines as the 21st century Western-backed version of political Islam that would preserve US strategic goals in the region.
The rise of an alternative Western-fed version of political Islamism in the Muslim world in the past decade was meant to leave the American administration with only one alternative option to the costly post-9/11 confrontationalist approach to Islamist movements and justify America’s off-course attempts to consider ways to engage them and develop a policy on democratically elected Islamists. New strategic thinking was needed to help average Americans and hawkish confrontationalists in the Bush administration overcome what came to be known in strategic thinking as “the Islamist dilemma,” i.e., how America can promote democracy in the region without risking bringing Islamists to power. This dilemma had crippled US strategic plans and was to be overcome. Accordingly, media and policy circles provided forums for concomitant debates, where post-9/11 discussions on whether Islam (rather than other factors) explains the freedom deficit and lack of democracy in the region gradually gave way to questions about whether Islam and/or which forms of Islam can co-exist with democracy.

Being important channels of hegemonic communication and consensus engineering (Herman, 2002), US media provided a forum for such debates. In a groundbreaking study examining media representation of the specific relationship between “Islam” and “democracy” in the American prestige press between 1985 and 2005, Smeeta Mishra found out that the coverage of ‘Islam’ and ‘democracy’ increased substantially after the 9/11 attacks, reaching a peak when US invaded Iraq in 2003. She argued that

knowledge about Islam and democracy was produced primarily in conflict situations when the world’s greatest power came in contact with Middle Eastern countries in coercive capacities … The nature of coverage with its focus on violence, barbaric punishments and conflict heightened the sense of fear and paranoia about the ‘threat’ of Islam and established the need to control it by Western intervention. However, it must also be noted that the second dominant leading sub-topic of overall coverage was about moderate Islam’s compatibility with democracy. (Mishra, 2006:212)

These media debates were an adjunct to fierce and protracted academic debates about ‘moderate Islam’’s’ compatibility with ‘democracy,’ linking lack of democracy in the Muslim world to anti-Americanism and terrorism. These intellectual debates are worth studying.

-The intellectual and academic roots

The intellectual debate about “moderate Islamism” and its compatibility with democracy brought to the surface simmering conflicts between the confrontationalists and the accommodationists who had been competing for the attention of US policy makers for the past three decades. The former, led by Princeton scholar Bernard Lewis, Harvard Professor Samuel Huntington, and other scholars, kept on advocating the clash between Islam and the West and the incompatibility of Islam with democracy. This camp dominated the intellectual debate before and after 9/11. The supporters of the opposite camp, led by John Esposito, Robert Heffner, Noah Feldman, (11) and others, perceive the Islamic threat as a myth (Esposito, 1999), and kept on making distinctions between ‘moderate Muslims’ who want to come to power through democratic elections and what they consider an extremist minority who are undemocratic and espouse
violence. These accommodationists seem to have gradually dominated the scene after US costly invasion of Iraq in 2003.

The concept also created conflicting responses within Islamist circles. Some Scholars of Islam discarded it as contradictory to Islamic scripture as Islam is considered ‘moderate’ compared to other religions. They dismiss it as a Western construct. The main argument that runs across such works as ‘Don't Call Me Moderate, Call Me Normal’ by Ed Husain, ‘Mystics, Modernists and Literalists’ by Akbar Ahmed, and ‘Don't Gloss over the Violent Texts’ by Tawfik Hamid, for example, is that the designation ‘moderate Islam’ is simplistic and flawed as it is meant to differentiate a minority of Muslims as a category from ‘radical Islam,’ insinuating that real Islam-often perceived as radical- is intolerable, while Islam in moderation is tolerable. These and likeminded scholars consider that Western contribution should consist in helping promote a more nuanced and accurate understanding of Muslim societies.

However, while the opposite camp of American Muslim scholars recognized the limits of the category ‘moderate Muslims,’ they adopted it. Eager to have a say in shaping US foreign policy in the Middle East after 9/11 (B.H. Salem, 2010), they helped the accommodationist camp by contributing to define the concept from within. In fact, the decade that preceded the so-called ‘Arab spring’ witnessed the flow of streams of articles and volumes about “moderate Islam” in the United States, written mainly by American Muslim scholars or scholars of Islam in America who are associated with mainstream American Muslim organizations and research institutes and who were striving to make themselves heard to the foreign policy makers in the Bush administration after 9/11. Frustrated by their exclusion from the debate on US post-9/11 counterterrorism policy and the predominant influence that the pro-Israeli lobbies and think tanks have played in shaping the course of US relations with the Muslim world, they presented themselves as voices of moderation within the US (condemning terrorism and adhering to America’s democratic values), and as an epitome of like-minded ‘moderate Muslims’ throughout the Muslim world who, unlike them, are unable to make the moderate voice of Islam heard because they live under secular dictatorships. At the core of their message, which gained momentum after the sheer failure of the Bush administration to bring democracy to the Iraqi people through an endless military occupation, (12) is the premise that if democracy is given a chance to bloom in the Middle East, ‘moderate Muslim’ voices will reverberate throughout the Middle East. They argued that their message of moderation would offer an alternative to extremist interpretations of Islam which, according to them, thrived under secular dictatorships that stifled voices of moderation in the Muslim world. Most of them had affiliations, leanings or sympathy with the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt or one of its offshoots across the Muslim world.

Even though they recognize the limits of the category ‘moderate Muslims,’ American Muslim scholars contributed with varying degrees to define it and its distinctive features in tandem with American accommodationist scholars in an unremitting surge of articles. “Reflection on the ‘Moderate Muslims’ Debate” by Taha Jabir al-Alwani, and “Moderate Muslims: A Mainstream of Modernists, Islamists, Conservatives, and traditionalists” by John Esposito, and
“Islamic Democracy and Moderate Muslims: The Straight path Runs Through the Middle East
Khan, M. A. Muqtedar published in the same issue of the American Journal of Islamic Social
Sciences in summer 2005 as well as Debating Moderate Islam (2007) by M. A. Muqtedar, and
Islam and the Challenge of Democracy by Khaled Abou El Fadl (2004) not only represent
samples in a flow of contributions to define “moderate Islam” but also to associate it with
democracy by helping clarify the philosophical and theological compatibility between ‘Islam’ (in
its moderate version) and ‘democracy’ from within.

Since the 1990s, Brotherhood Islamist groups in the US as well as across the Muslim world,
which had developed as single-issue parties preoccupied with proselytizing and instituting sharia
law, increasingly started focusing on democratic reform, publicly committing themselves to the
alternation of power through elections and popular sovereignty. However, their ideas did not
resonate within US decision making circles. This was not surprising as the 1990s did not
represent the Muslim Brotherhood’s moment in US strategic thinking. The moment came after
9/11, 2001 as a battery of defense strategists and foreign policy analysts associated with a wide
range of think tanks came to associate theory with policy and define a specific role for the
Muslim Brotherhood branches, so-called ‘moderate Islamist groups,’ to help implement US
strategic plans in the Muslim world. A survey of such plans is compelling to define the
ideological roots of the so-called “spontaneous leaderless revolutions” and their distant
philosophers.

2-The Architects of “the Arab Spring”: American Think Tanks, ‘Moderate Muslims,’ and
democracy promotion

During the decade that preceded the advent of the so-called ‘Arab Spring,’ a battery of
defense strategists and foreign policy analysts associated with a wide range of think tanks,
including the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, the Washington Institute for Near
East Policy, the Council on Foreign Relations, the Brookings Institute, and the RAND Center for
Middle East Public Policy published streams of volumes on Islamist groups in the Middle East.
They came to present ‘moderate Islamists’ as alternative credible interlocutors for the US.
Rethinking the Battle of Ideas: How the United States Can Help Muslim Moderates (2008),
Uncharted Journey: Promoting Democracy in the Middle East (2005), Building Moderate
Moderate Muslim Brotherhood: Friend or Foe?” (2007), and “Strategies for Engaging Political
Islam” (2010) represent drops in an unremitting flow of volumes published by American think
tanks to help advance the accommodationist cause beyond defending the theological and
philosophical arguments supporting the compatibility of Islam with democracy (see bibliography).
They provided US policy makers with pragmatic and practical strategies on how to engage
‘moderate Muslims’ and expedite the implementation of US strategic plans in the region.

Most of these works tend to draw clear lines between the ‘moderate’ Islamist groups,
embodied in the Muslim Brotherhood and its worldwide offshoots, and the extremist Jihadi
groups, embodied in al Qaeda. Some of them, however, express varying degrees of faith in the
ability of the Islamists of the Muslim Brotherhood to embrace democratic values and acknowledge their inherently undemocratic nature. A case in point is Thomas R. McCabe, who argued in ‘The Muslim Middle East: Is there a Democratic Option?’ that ‘American counterterrorism strategy defines as “moderate” or “mainstream” any Muslim who does not support the jihadi extremists, which sets the bar very low and does not consider the question of how widespread such support actually might be.’ Accordingly, he considers that ‘Moderate’ Islamist groups, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, ‘are moderate only in relative terms, are mostly antidemocratic, and are more correctly considered nonviolent enemies of the U.S.’ As such, he warns US policy makers that a democratic opening in the Muslim Middle East ‘is all too likely to bring to power profoundly antidemocratic groups that are virulently and possibly violently hostile to the U.S.’ He recommended as a possible alternative strategy ‘one stressing good government, with gradual democratization as societies decompress.’(McCabe, 2007:483)

Not totally dismissing these fears, it seems that at the core of most of these theories there is an unwavering belief that, the United States no longer had a choice. According to Leiken and Steven Brooke, if the United States is to cope with the Muslim revival while advancing key national interests,

policymakers must recognize its almost infinite variety of political (and apolitical) orientations. When it comes to the Muslim Brotherhood, the beginning of wisdom lies in differentiating it from radical Islam and recognizing the significant differences between national Brotherhood organizations. That diversity suggests Washington should adopt a case-by-case approach, letting the situation in each individual country determine when talking with—or even working with—the Brotherhood is feasible and appropriate. In the United States’ often futile search for “moderate Muslims” with active community support—and at a moment when, isolated and suspect, Washington should be taking stock of its interests and capabilities in the Muslim world—a conversation with the Muslim Brotherhood makes strong strategic sense. (Leiken, 2007)

To advance its hegemonic ambitions in the region—strengthening its grip on Middle Eastern oil wealth and markets, extending its network of military bases and facilities, and redrawing the map of the region by establishing pipeline states on the wreck of the current nation states—and to make good use of the Islamist revival stoked up by the fires of anti-Americanism fanned by its imperial policies in Iraq and its passionate attachment to Israel (to recruit Jihadists for its new wars), the US had to reinvent a moral canopy for its imperial policies in the region by brandishing a new version of the democratization mission. Consequently, it had to stop supporting secular dictatorships and look for ‘moderate groups’ within an almost infinite variety of political and apolitical Islamist orientations in the region. In this respect, Leiken and likeminded political strategists helped free US policymaking from the shackles of considering Islamist groups as an extremist monolith. As such, they removed a hurdle which had handicapped US policymakers and prevented them from implementing pending US strategic plans in the region.
As they singled out the Muslim Brotherhood as the only variation of political Islam in the Muslim world that is capable of helping bring Western democracy to the region, these scholars not only discarded the cacophony of non-Islamist voices emanating from the region, but also other variations of political Islam, (13) upon which the US (following the British precedent) had relied at the earlier stages of empire building in the region (Dreyfuss, 2005). These include the Wahabi-inspired Muslim World League which played a key role in financing Islamist groups in the Muslim world in the 1980s, helping furnish a global Jihadist army bringing about a cost-free historical victory for the US in the 1989 Afghan- USSR war. However, this brand of Islamism ended up being associated with terrorism and anti-Americanism in US collective memory after 9/11 as the majority of the hijackers were Saudi nationals. As such, by selecting the Muslim Brotherhood groups, which are subsumed under the umbrella of the recently established-Qatar sponsored pro-US World League of Islamic Social Scientists, whose rise to prominence since 9/11, 2001 has represented a real challenge to the Saudi authoritative role over sunni Islam in the Muslim World and to Saudi-US relations, these policy shapers tended to dispel American fears about the incompatibility of Islamists’ religious commitments and Western democratic commitments for pluralism, peaceful political succession, women’s rights; and about the kind of foreign policies such groups might pursue, especially with respect to the state of Israel.

Following perennial Orientalist approaches based on silencing cacophonous native populations and selecting one voice to speak on their behalf (Said, 1997), American strategic thinkers claimed that they had analyzed each national and local Islamist group independently and sought out those that were open to engagement. In ‘The Moderate Muslim Brotherhood,’ Leiken boosts that

Over the past year, we have met with dozens of Brotherhood leaders and activists from Egypt, France, Jordan, Spain, Syria, Tunisia, and the United Kingdom. In long and sometimes heated discussions, we explored the Brotherhood’s stance on democracy and jihad, Israel and Iraq, the United States, and what sort of society the group seeks to create. The Brotherhood is a collection of national groups with differing outlooks, and the various factions disagree about how best to advance its mission. But all reject global jihad while embracing elections and other features of democracy. There is also a current within the Brotherhood willing to engage with the United States. In the past several decades, this current -- along with the realities of practical politics -- has pushed much of the Brotherhood toward moderation. (Leiken, 2007)

Accordingly, US strategic thinkers came to recognize that the Muslim Brotherhood presents a notable opportunity to advance US strategic plans in the region under the cloak of democratization and to reinvent US image in the Arab streets by creating seemingly anti-Western, yet US-friendly, new ruling elite. The protracted interviews conducted with the leaders of these movements in exile or in their countries rather than a deep review of recent Islamist literature to gauge the real depth of their ideological change gave these scholars confidence that in their pursuit of power, the strong pragmatic tendencies of ‘mainstream’ Brotherhood Islamist organizations across the Muslim world showed that they were willing to compromise their extremist ideology and make difficult choices (Krebs, 2008).
Thus, by anabaptizing a section of the political Islam spectrum “moderate” on the eve of the so-called “Arab spring,” a new pact was made. It consisted in securing US assistance to a section of the (militant) Islamist spectrum to reach power through ‘democratic means’ in return for helping promote US strategic plans in the region under the cloak of democracy promotion. But how are these new ‘moderate Islamists’ going to temper the more extremist groups of the Islamist spectrum and their grassroots, whose main aim is to establish the Islamic Caliphate that fuses the post-colonial nation-state borders (a strategic aim they share with the US)? How are they going to neutralize the adverse secularist, nationalist, and leftist sections of the political spectrum and attract them to play the new democratic game according to the new rules set by the ventriloquists of the global order?

To help all ends meet, the architects of this strategic thinking got assurances from these ‘moderate Islamists,’ after decade-long interviews made throughout the Muslim world and the Islamic diasporas in the West, that they would abandon the old ideological package of the 1980s characterized theologically by universalism, monopoly of religious truth, exclusivism, and obligation; and politically by seizure of power through undemocratic means, such as infiltration of the state security and defense apparatuses, staging coups, and political assassinations. The interviewers, as clearly stated in most of their works, were also promised that if assisted by the US to reach power, which would only happen with US-induced fall of the secular dictatorships, the ‘moderate Islamists’ would embrace an alternative ideological package. This package consists in maintaining the civic aspect of the state, recognizing universal human rights (such as gender equality and freedom of worship), and acknowledging both politically and theologically pluralism, inclusion, and compromise in principles and practice (Rabasa, 2007). As such, the new package does not exclude acceptance of forms of shari’a / Islamic law. While it recognizes that shari’a is incompatible with democracy, it recommends that the ‘moderate Islamists’ should adopt non-sectarian sources of law by being selective and by choosing from Shari’a what may be compatible with democracy and incompatible with terrorism and use of illegitimate sources of violence. The new package’s definition “violence” is as hazy as that of its definition of the “sources of law.” The important thing, according to the advocates of the ‘moderate Islamist’ project is to define the ethical principles that regulate violence. In this respect they argue that ‘violence against civilians and suicide operations [understandably against Western and Israeli targets], ‘that is to say terrorism, is not legitimate. It is, however, legitimate to use violence defensively to protect Muslims against aggressors, [understandably Muslims of different sects]. They also consider that ‘legitimate violence must respect normative limits, such as using minimum force required, respecting the lives of non-combatants, and avoiding ambushes and assassinations.’ (Rabasa, 2007: 66-67)

This package, formulated by the RAND Corporation in Building Moderate Muslim Networks (2007), crowns a series of earlier studies conducted by the same institute in the aftermath of 9/11 2001, which acted as a catapult urging the American administration to change its strategies in the Middle East. These earlier studies, which include Cheryl Benard’s Civil Democratic Islam (2003) and Angel Rabasa et al., The Muslim World After 9/11 (2004), were intended to gauge the ideological tendencies in the Muslim world to provide a ‘factual’ basis for
the ideological framework of this pact. This pact and the studies upon which it rests were presented to American decision makers as a yardstick to be used to sort out extremist groups (their declared adversaries, but needed pawns) from the moderate ones (their overt potential allies). They provide a moral canopy (a wrapping for US imperial plans in the region) that would be used to justify US seemingly ineluctable recognition of the post-2011 Islamist regimes under the cloak of accepting the status quo on the basis of which the new formula for ‘democracy’ and ‘(in)stability’ promotion in the region are to be made. They also helped remove major ideological hurdles that are at the core of the American-Islamist dilemma: how to promote democracy in the Muslim world without risking bringing Islamists to power.

Having removed the major ideological hurdles constituting the American-Islamist dilemma, which had paralyzed American strategic plans in the MENA region, American centers of strategic studies provided American decision makers and organizations, such as NGOs attempting to organize support for “moderate Muslims,” with a detailed strategic roadmap to guide the Middle East in a ‘favorable’ direction by playing to Muslim Brotherhood groups’ pragmatism or what Rabasa called ‘instincts’ (Rabasa, 2007). They advised American decision makers to enter into strategic dialogue with the region’s Islamist groups and parties. To facilitate this dialogue, works such Building Moderate Muslim Networks (2007) offered US policy makers a practical road map for ‘moderate’ network building in the Muslim world. Defining ‘moderate Muslims as ‘those who share the key dimensions of democratic culture,’ the authors call upon the US government to engage ‘moderate Muslims.’ They bolstered their argument on three rather shaky Neo-Orientalist generalizations: ‘First, that Islamists represent the only real mass-based alternative to authoritarian regimes in the Muslim world’; second, that branches of the Muslim Brotherhood ‘have evolved to support pluralistic democracy, women’s rights, etc.’ and third, that Islamists are ‘more likely to be successful in dissuading potential terrorists from committing violence [understandably in Israel and the US] than are mainstream clerics.’ (Rabasa, 2007: 66-67-76)

Heeding T.E. Lawrence’s advice to the British imperialists on the eve of the Arab Revolt against the Ottoman Empire, (14) the authors cautioned American decision makers against the dangers of outside support of Muslim ‘moderates’ as an exceedingly sensitive matter in Islamic countries. Instead, they recommended that assistance (capacity-building programs) from international resources must rely on NGOs that have existing relationships in these countries to channel assistance and to engage America’s new partners in the Middle East. A special role was attributed in this work to the Washington-based, US-funded Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy (CSID), which was founded as a non-profit organization by Muslim and non-Muslim academics, professionals, and activists in 1999, i.e., two years before September 11th, 2001. Their mission, as they define it on their website, is to study Islamic and democratic political thought and to merge them into a modern Islamic democratic discourse. It was one of the most sought after sources by the American media after 9/11 to act as a “voice of moderation” by denouncing the attacks and distancing them from the teaching of Islam. Soon it developed, along with other predominantly Egyptian Brotherhood Public relations committees, such as the Muslim Public
Affairs Council (MPAC modeled after the Israeli lobby AIPAC), into staunch advocates of American Muslim engagement in American politics, acting, as Congressional lobbies courting US decision makers to engage them in shaping US foreign policy in the Middle East by presenting candidate for such influential pro-Israeli foreign policy institutions as the Middle East Forum. (B. H. Salem, 2010)

Overnight, a branch of the CSID was founded in Tunis soon after January 14th within the precincts of the headquarters of Ennahda, Tunisia’s “moderate Islamist” party. The CSID-Tunisia is headed by Tunisian-American Radwan Masmoudi, a former leading member of the ‘Movement de Tendance Islamique’ (the pre-1987 name of Ennahda) and stalwart advocate of its Islamization project. As the director of the CSID, he is well-connected to Islamist Brotherhood organizations worldwide. Since 2008, the CSID has been organizing workshops about ‘Islam and democracy’ and training ‘Islamist activists’ in Muslim majority countries, including Tunisia, with the cooperation of American NGO’s and the help of few Tunisian human and civil rights organizations which managed to act independently from the government before January 14th. In Sofien ben Farhat’s talkshow Fasl Almaqal, broadcast on Attounsia TV (on January 5th, 2013), Masmoudi also acknowledged that he had served as a go-between Tunisian Islamists, American politicians, and think tanks since 2004.

Since 2004, the CSID had also worked in tandem with US-funded Street Law, which is an organization that creates classroom and community programs to teach activists around the world about democracy and human rights, to develop materials and programs for NGO leaders in the Middle East to train Islamist activists on how to promote democracy in the region. They had distributed materials that link the concepts of democracy to Islamic principles to shatter Islamist grassroots’ perception that democracy as a system is foreign to their own culture by pointing to ideas and historical traditions in Islam that support democratic principles, such as shura (consultative decision making). The Arabic-language text Islam and Democracy: Towards Effective Citizenship was developed in 2005 to teach Islamist grassroots audiences in Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, and Morocco. On February 1st 2006, the Street Law website boosted that Street Law and CSID had introduced the materials to NGOs, youth, and religious and community leaders in each of the participating Arab countries, and ‘trained them in how to teach the materials in their communities. In the course of the next six months, these leaders will conduct classes with their constituencies, eventually reaching 2,000 people in each of the four countries.”(15)

In countries, like Tunisia where freedom of Assembly was curtailed by an arsenal of repressive laws, the American embassy played an important facilitating role in promoting the culture of NGOism before and after the fall of the ben Ali regime. Not surprisingly, that soon after the fall of the ben Ali regime, “the High Commission for the Protection of the Objectives of the Revolution, Political Reform and Democratic Transition” approved a new decree-law number 88 on associations that was then promulgated by the acting president on September 24, 2011. The law, which is still operational in country that has been fighting a war on terrorism, eliminates the crime of “membership in” or “providing services to” an unrecognized organization. The removal
of this provision that had been used to imprison thousands of opposition party activists led to the emergence of more than 9 thousand new associations, most of which have leanings with Islamist parties or serve Islamist agendas. To give a free hand to these organizations to prosper and promote their Islamization project, Article 34 of Chapter Six of the decree law puts no restrictions on the financial resources or subject them to meticulous control. It rather allowed these organizations to accept both domestic and foreign donations, grants and wills. One of the short-term products of this ‘democracy promotion’ strategy is that under the auspices of America’s “moderate Islamists,” these associations have turned Tunisia into the first Muslim world exporter of male Jihadists and female sexual jihadists to the conflict areas, which are in the process of being reshaped into pipeline states in accordance with the empire’s “Project for the Greater Middle East.” It has also helped tighten the bond between arms trafficking, smuggling, illegal trade and terrorism.

These and other developments on the Tunisian stage that I explored in previous research works (B. H. Salem, 2014) expose the fallacies of democracy-promotion through the ‘moderate Islamist’ construct and their reversion to their radical agenda of the 1980s. However, such a backward move was by no means thrown in the realm of the unpredictable by the American centers of strategic studies that hatched the whole project. Indeed, arguments against engaging “moderate Islamists” were raised by some US strategic thinkers in some sort of monologue only to be discarded as a sideshow criticism. These include the absence of any guarantees that the so-called ‘moderate Islamists’ might revert to a more radical agendas once they come to power as was the case with the Islamists of Iran in 1979. They also referred to the fact that official recognition and support would enhance extremist Islamist agenda and credibility and enable them to proselytize more effectively in the community rather than dissuade potential Jihadists from committing potential acts of terrorism. Another counter argument was that building alliances with the Islamists and ignoring the liberal forces on the grounds that ‘moderate and liberal groups are organizationally weak and have been as yet unable to develop substantial constituencies,’ (Rabasa, 2007: 77) would simply perpetuate these weaknesses and would encourage the spread of extremist movements, with high costs on the societies. The 2007 Rand study provides the following blunt response to this very counterargument: “One presumption of this study,” the writers replied, “is that the primary weakness of these groups is organizational and that linking them together in robust networks would amplify their message, broaden their appeal, and enable them to compete more effectively with Islamist groups in the political marketplace.” (Rabasa, 2007: 77)

Accordingly, the assumption is that non-Islamist groups should remain divided and weak so that the Islamists can dominate the scene as the most organized political force in the region. As such, while recognizing the shadow of an impending religious dictatorship headed by a coalition between the Islamist ‘moderates’ and extremists, the authors did not show any attempt to develop a strategy to ward off such a disastrous scenario. On the contrary, they steadfastly wrapped up the issue by unabashedly emphasizing that “still capacity-building programs and resources are better directed at moderate and liberal Muslim organizations.” Yet in a footnote quoting Daniel Brumberg, the authors suggest what might pass as an unperceived strategy to help
launder the image of the Islamists as they promote their latent undemocratic agendas stealthily. In a Washington Quarterly article, scholar Daniel Brumberg (16) argues that uncritical engagement with Islamists in the cause of democracy ‘would strengthen illiberal Islamist forces, particularly in the absence of institutional reform that would prod mainstream Islamists to forge a democratic power-sharing accommodation with regime and with non-Islamist political forces.’ (Rabasa, 78) What can be inferred from this quotation is that in countries where institutional reform is possible, as has been the case in Tunisia, the divided non-Islamist political spectrum will simply supply the Islamists with an unremitting flow of temporary partners who would engage in coalition governments with the ‘moderate Islamists’ only to bear the brunt of the rise of terrorism and the concomitant economic decline, the rise of corruption, the deepening of social and economic injustices, and decline of state institutions due to ‘Islamist’ infiltration of the state apparatus. In this way, the non-Islamist spectrum contributes inadvertently to help create a fertile ground for the rise of the promised Islamic state by accepting to play a make-believe democratic game, the rules and outcomes of which are predetermined by external forces. Accordingly, in an Islamist friendly made-for-the-Muslim-world democracy, premeditated lack of equality of opportunity between competing parties in popular elections, electoral systems that give Islamic parties a number of parliamentary seats that is glaringly disproportional to the secured popular vote, lack of accountability for Islamist parties predestined to remain in power with alternating minor non-Islamist parties become democratic tools by these studies’ standards. Still, the studies recognize that this version of ‘democracy for the dummies’ might fail in some regions and succeed with varying degrees in others due to the regional varieties in which the various branches of the universal Muslim Brotherhood would operate.

The dice was cast and the advent of the Islamist era was hailed by the American centers of strategic studies and decision makers even before Obama’s election in 2008. In her speech at the American University in Cairo in June 2005, Condoleezza Rice referred to US President George W Bush's second inaugural address, in which he said his aim was to help people find their democratic voice and not to impose a US-style government on them. ‘For 60 years, my country, the United States, pursued stability at the expense of democracy in this region, here in the Middle East, and we achieved neither,’ she told an audience that included government officials and academics in Cairo. ‘Throughout the Middle East the fear of free choices can no longer justify the denial of liberty. It is time to abandon the excuses that are made to avoid the hard work of democracy,’ (17) Ms Rice warned the ‘secular/nationalist’ dictators.

“Seeking a new beginning” between the US and the Muslim world has become a common theme running through President Obama’s statements since his election in 2008. Obama’s first trip overseas as a president was to Turkey. His speeches in Turkey (April 6th, 2009,) and then in Cairo (June 4th, 2009) carry Ms Rice’s logic further. At the core of his speeches was the idea that the US must atone for its past policies in the Muslim world. His speeches reflect a dramatic shift in the American Administrations’ relation with the then American-backed secular dictatorships as the president announced his unwavering commitment to all governments that reflect the will of the people. He also expressed his administration’s resolve to ‘respect the right of all peaceful and
law-abiding voices to be heard around the world, even if we disagree with them (implying the Islamists). And we will welcome all elected, peaceful governments – provided they govern with respect for all their people.’ (18) In singling out Turkey as a “moderate Islamic” country, (19) he anabaptized “moderate Islam”/Universal Brotherhood political Islam in its ‘exemplary’ Turkish version as a panacea to America’s protracted “Islamist dilemma” and as a force that would give the new version of ‘democracy’ a chance to bloom in the region. The great experiment began early in 2011 as Arab publics took to the street in Tunisia and later on in neighboring countries to topple down the “secular dictators” who secured the continuity of post-world War II nation states, and as they soon went to the polls in Tunisia, Morocco, and Egypt, and to no one’s surprise, Islamist parties came out on top in each case. Did all this happen spontaneously? Certainly, not.

Conclusion

Since January 2011, the Tunisian uprisings and their aftermath have generated a spate of analyses and attempts to historicize what seemed to many in the academic circles elusive moments. However, the majority of the accounts on the subject tend to corroborate to what has become a global romance of a ‘revolution without leaders—without philosophers.’ This work questions this myth by arguing that the events that happened in the MENA region in 2011 are part of a Master-narrative written in the American centers of strategic studies. This paper claims a ground for itself by focusing on the makers rather than the making of the so-called ‘revolutions.’ It delineates the profile of their overlooked omniscient ‘Philosophers,’ and traces the broad outlines of the ideological apparatus informing the 2011 events and shaping their aftermath. It sets off to analyze the Western ideological roots of the ‘moderate Islamist’ construct that was advanced as a ‘reliable alternative’ to the worn out secular dictatorships. This work also studied the broad terms of the compact made between these new strategic actors, US policy strategists, and policy makers and provided a sketch of the roadmap towards implementing the new strategic plans for the region as laid down by US think tanks.

Upon observation, this Neo-Orientalist strategic thinking is not founded on deep delving into the cultural, historical, and ideological diversities within Muslim civil societies. It rather reduces them into one of the relatively stagnant ideological variations of political Islam marketed by its Western and Middle Eastern demagogues as the embodiment of timeless Islam. With total disregard for the internal and external dynamics that have been reshaping inherently diverse Muslim societies and guiding their evolving aspirations, Western strategic thinkers stroke a deal with the Islamist expatriates and activists they interviewed in the past decade. They got assurances from them, and their representatives in American/ Western Muslim political action committees (PACs), that once they are assisted to seize power through elections, they would adjust their religious assumptions and ideologies and make them meet the requirements of Western democracy.

Both sides tended to ignore internal historical and cultural dynamisms within Muslim societies that had already helped some of them generate their own versions of “moderate Islam” that is not necessarily in line with the imported version of (political) Islam espoused by the
Universal Muslim Brotherhood, and their own version of democracy, which is not necessarily at variance with its Western counterpart, but bears the cultural and historical specificities of those civil societies. As demonstrated through previous research work I conducted about the Tunisian experience under ‘moderate Islamist’ rule between 2011 and 2014, (and as adversely confirmed through the Egyptian, Libyan and Syrian cases), the new recipe for democracy promotion, which is based on an exotic match between a transplanted version of political Islam and an American version of democracy ‘made for the Muslim world,’ cannot lead to any form of democratic transition in Muslim societies. Moves towards democratization are only possible where civil societies within respective Muslim countries have already developed internal mechanisms that would enable them to carve a democratic process of their own. The Tunisian experience with political Islam since 2011 has shown that the Islamist project has rather been founded on the attempt to eradicate the cultural and historical foundations upon which rests the civil society’s indigenous democratization project as reflected in the slogans of the 2011 uprisings (B.H.Salem, 2014). Yet through a distortive global public relations campaign, that invites deeper academic studies, the little gains made so far by the sponsors of the indigenous project aiming to set the country on the path of democratization through a desperate fight against the transplanted theocratic project of the Islamists have been unabashedly attributed to the ‘moderate Islamists’ to launder their undemocratic record.

Both the Islamists and their Western sponsors believe in the backwardness of the indigenous cultures of the target societies. No ordinary observer of American/Western Orientalist literature, film industry (Shaheen, 2001-2008), social history textbooks, and media reports on the region in the past decades will fail to notice how backward Muslim societies are perceived compared to the civilized West, which vindicates the West’s ‘civilizing mission.’ The Islamists also consider themselves invaders (fatihs), whose special mission is to spread the ‘true Islam’ amongst the heathen (indigenous population). This explains why in Tunisia, for example, the majority Islamist party and its Islamist orbit spared no effort to divide the society into ‘Muslims’ (those who are with them) and ‘infidels’ (those who are against their Islamist project) immediately after the fall of the secular regime. Rather than helping promote democratization projects that are in sync with the internal dynamics and aspirations of each Muslim society targeted by the so-called ‘Arab spring’, both the ‘moderate Islamists’ and their Western sponsors presented Muslim societies with a –then- ‘successful’ Turkish model, which was marketed as a telltale sign of a successful match between ‘Islam’ and ‘democracy’ and as an alternative to the Iranian model. This was done with total disregard for the cultural, historical, and geostrategic specificities of the Turkish context which helped create some sort of ‘Turkish miracle’ that is currently on the verge of falling apart under the heavy load of corruption charges brought against government and accusations of sponsorship of extremist Islamist groups in the current lands of Jihad in the region.
End Notes

1- Iran initially attempted to applaud the rebellions as an expression of popular opposition to secular tyrants, but it quickly transpired that protesters were not clamoring for an Iranian-style polity.

2- *Foreign Policy* is published by the Council on Foreign Relations whose counterpart in Britain is Chatham House (Royal Institute of International Affairs). Both think tanks have as a main objective influencing and helping shape global decision-making and international relations. On November 26th, 2012, Chatham House followed suit and conferred its prize on Rached Ghannouchi and Moncef Marzouki.

3- According to a Wikileaks cable bearing the ID number 06TUNIS2298, a delegation of the American Embassy met with Hammadi Jebali in Sousse in 2006 to discuss the future of “moderate Islamists” as a viable alternative to the crumbling dictatorships. Among the arguments that were put forward by Jebali to convince the Americans to support the integration of “the moderate Islamists” in Tunisian politics is that the “younger generation of radical Islamists, who according to him are more radical than the old generation of “moderate Islamists” that he represents, refuse all forms of communication with “the dictator.” Therefore, “the moderates” were presented as the only political force that can communicate with the radicals to temper their radicalism and that is also willing to enter into dialogue with the dictatorship to negotiate modalities leading to their reintegration within the political texture of Tunisia. So powerful, it seems, was US support for the rise of Islamists to power that on July 23rd, 2006, the same Wikileaks source reported that nine members of the Islamist party Ennahda sent a letter to Ben Ali to express their willingness to build new bridges of dialogue with the regime and request the reintegration of the Islamists in the political life of the country. An ordinary observer of the Tunisian scene at that time will not fail to notice that the question of debate with the radicals, who were under full control under the secular regime, was groundless. So why did the US want an interlocutor with the radical Islamist groups? What is its strategic importance for the US? Certainly, the answers would not be provided by Wikileaks, nor by US centers of strategic studies, but can be inferred from the quick rise of Tunisia into the world’s first exporter of terrorists to the Syrian war thanks to the logistic support of the ruling “moderate Islamists,” and the benediction of a silent international community and the US that turned their backs to a crime against humanity.

4- A similar deal was made with the ben Ali regime in 1992 after the Islamists opposed US and Saudi military intervention in Iraq and sided with Saddam Hussein.

5- A case in point is the work edited by the Tunisian-American scholar Nouri Gana titled *The making of the Tunisian revolution: contexts, architects and prospects* (2013). The book includes contributions made, among others, by Monica marks of the Brookings Institute and Moncef Marzouki-appointed director of the Tunisian Center of Strategic studies Tarek Kahlaoui. Moncef Marzouki, the former president of Tunisia under Islamist rule and one of the signatories of the famous letter sent to President Obama in may 2009 by global supporters of “moderate Islam,” including some Tunisian opposition leaders to ask him to support the rise of moderate Islamists to power, was introduced as one of the indirect contributors to this work. In one of the quoted statements attributed to Marzouki, he unashamedly asserted that what happened in Tunisia was not part of a Masternarrative. The letter that was signed by a wide range of American Think tanks can be retrieved from the Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy website at http://www.csidonline.org/documents/pdf/Open_Letter_to_Pres_Obama_about_Democracy.pdf

6- I am using the concept “Neo-Orientalism” to refer to an upgraded version of American Orientalism. American Orientalism was born in the throes of the Iranian revolution and was associated with the rise of an unwanted Islamist model. The rise of the new US-sponsored Islamist model requires a new terminology. For US strategic thinkers, the rise of Islamists in Tunisia significantly marked the theoretical decline of one Islamist model -Iran’s- and the ascent of another-Turkey’s.
7- Major violent operations included the terrorist attack on the RCD office in Bab Souika in 1991 and the May 91 plot to topple the regime that was also masterminded by the Islamists.

8- These included Zeitouni-oriented Islamists, the Tunisianists, who founded the Progressive Islamist Group in 1982. They called for breaking all ties with the Muslim Brotherhood’s heritage, which they considered outdated and out of tune with the Tunisian context. They advocated the need to create a societal project suited to the national character of the country rather than a political body aiming at taking power. The surge in Islamist militancy within the MTI was backed up by a cluster of radical salafi currents who favored using terrorism as a catalyst for popular uprisings to dismantle the civic state and build on its wrecks the Islamic state. These included mainly Al Islam Al Jihadi (Islamic Jihad, JI), Al Jabhat al Islamiya Al Tunisiyya (Tunisian Islamic front, FIT), and Hizb al Tahrir al-Islami (Islamic Liberation Parti, PLI).

9- In response to the killing of the four American contractors and the public display of their corpses, the US occupation forces wiped out the town, destroying houses, mosques, schools and clinics.

10- Esposito and Mogahed’s *Who Speaks for Islam?* (2008) presents the findings of the Gallup Poll of the Muslim world, which is considered the first ever data-based analysis of the points of view of more than 90% of the global Muslim community between 2001 and 2007.

11- Eye witnesses reported in January 2014 that Feldman fled from the Tunisian NCA, escaping attacks from non-Islamist NCA members who noticed his presence in Bardo. This bespeaks a refusal of any form of Western tutelage.

12- US protracted military occupation of Iraq generated a spate of attacks on the Bush administration inside the US due to the rising economic and human costs of what had become perceived as an unjust war by US taxpayers.

13- On March 7th, 2014, Saudi Arabia, who defines itself as the custodian of universal Islam, declared the Muslim Brotherhood, its US-sponsored competitor, a terrorist organization. Since then, Ghannouchi, who once defined his party as a branch of the Brotherhood to get Western support to reach power, has been trying to deny all links with it. This attests to the shaky foundations of Western categorizations of Islamist groups and their unabated pragmatism.

14- “Do not try to do too much with your hands. Better the Arabs do it tolerably than that you do it perfectly. It is their war, and you are there to help them, not to win it for them. Actually, also, under the very odd conditions of Arabia, your practiced work will not be as good as, perhaps you think it is.” Source: T.E. Lawrence. (8/20/1917). *Arab Bulletin*. Retrieved January 20, 2011 from www.lib.byu.edu/index.php/The_27_Articles_of_T.E._Lawrence.


18- ‘Remarks by the President at Cairo University, 6-4-09.’” Retrieved September 2010 from https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-cairo-university-6-04-09

19- U.S Secretary of State Hillary Clinton had praised Turkey as ‘a democratic country with a secular constitution’ during her visit to Ankara in March 2009.
References


