

*Democratic Views in Islamist Groups*

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### **Abstract**

Islamist groups do not have the greatest reputation among supporters of democracy as they are typically seen as anti-democratic. While there are a plethora of Islamist groups that oppose democracy, there are some that see the appeal in at least a few aspects of democracy. The question then becomes: why do some Islamist groups support democracy more than others? In an attempt to answer the question, this paper provides a unifying definition of Islamism that allows the reader to understand what Islamists' goals are, and what most Islamist groups have in common with each other to fit under the term "Islamism." Furthermore, a minimalist description of democracy that highlights elections over measures of normative values will be defined to properly measure Islamist support or opposition towards democracy. The paper also highlights which Islamic symbols Islamists borrow from to justify their views of democracy. By using both a "most similar systems design" and a "most different systems design," Islamist groups are compared based on their ideologies and views of democracy in order to find out how, and why these Islamist groups vary in their views of democracy.

## **Introduction**

Orientalist beliefs have long described Islam as a religion inferior to Western civilization (Said, 1977). Thus wherever an Islamist movement began to mobilize and gain popular support throughout the Islamic world, democracy advocates' hopes for democratization fell accordingly. The assumption that Islamist movements and democratization must go against each other is maintained by the idea that all Islamist groups are the same. Many Islamist groups are different and thus would naturally have different opinions regarding democracy. Some are able to use democratic institutions to their advantage, some genuinely believe in democracy, and some adamantly oppose democracy. In order to change the perception of these Islamist groups, categorizing them into those that support aspects of democracy vs. those who don't is a good start. The question then becomes: Why do some Islamist groups support democracy more than others?

## **Methodology**

The methodology of this paper follows a guideline that explores which Islamist groups support democracy more. First, Islamism as an ideology must be defined. There are many disputes over what Islamism means, and Islamist groups aren't necessarily unified on the definition either. Second, democracy must also be defined to facilitate this study. Democracy means many different things to different people, but what is one single definition that Islamists can at least value if they wish to pursue democracy or democratic elements? For example, secularism cannot be a measure of democracy in this study, since it would eliminate all Islamist groups from the equation. Third, Islamic symbols among different ideologies of Islam that

support aspects of democracy are identified. As discussed below, Islamist groups justify their actions by using Islamic symbols and use those symbols to guide their path forward. Thus the identified Islamic symbols will help explain how certain Islamists can justify their support for democracy.

After explaining the definitions of Islamism, democracy, and the Islamic symbols that can relate to democracy, it is time to run the experiment. Two methods are used. First, a “most similar systems design” (MSSD) is used to compare Islamist groups with similar independent variables but different results of the dependent variable. In this case, the MSSD examines Islamist groups with similar characteristics that display different attitudes toward democracy.

The second method is a “most different systems design” (MDSD) that compares Islamist groups featuring different independent variables but similar results of the dependent variable. Within the MDSD, Islamist groups exhibit different characteristics but have similar attitudes towards democracy. After the MSSD and the MDSD results are recorded, the goal is to explain why different Islamist groups support democracy more than others.

## **Defining Islamism**

The first mistake made by Orientalists and others is the assumption that Islamism has a single definition. Even Islamists often disagree with each other over what an Islamist movement should be, the goals of the movement, and how to pursue them. Islamist groups are hardly united, in fact, they can go to war against each other such as *Hezbollah* and *Al-Nusra*, or IS-K and the *Taliban*. Islamist groups have different ideologies, political motivations, sponsors, and geographical factors that make these groups more similar or more different from each other.

There are general factors that can help organize the definition of Islamism to be more concise. For one, all Islamist groups are based on Islam as a religious principle. They gather

symbols from Islam to frame their own ideologies or political endeavors. Where they may gather the textual sources for their Islamist framing may differ. They universally grab ideas from the Quran—the holiest book of Islam—but they also use different *Hadiths* (sayings and recordings of the Prophet Muhammad, his family, and his companions), *Sunnah* (the actions and manners of the Prophet Muhammad), and *Fatwas* (religious decrees of Islamic Scholars) to justify their actions and base their ideology (Mozaffari, 2007).

While Islamists have some unifying ideas, their ideological goals are different. At times the ultimate goal of Islamism has been defined as the ‘conquest of the world’ by Muslims and Islam (Mozaffari, 2007). While many Islamists might want to see the whole world convert to Islam, that is not the focus of many individual Islamist groups. A definition featuring ‘conquest of the world’ excludes groups that are nationalist or have limited their objectives to a certain cause. Some groups such as *Al-Adl wa Al-Ihsan*, a Sufi Islamist group, focus on the spiritual purification of its militants rather than an engagement in Moroccan electoral politics (Lauzière, 2012). Thus the notion that Islamist groups simply aim to conquer the world dismisses the specific aims of each group.

Another definition given to Islamism by some scholars is that it is a purely reactionary ideology. Scholars often point to the viewpoints of Sayyid Qutb—a key member of the Muslim Brotherhood—who was disgusted with American secularism, capitalism, and support for Israeli Zionism (Akhavi, 2018). The motivations for the Muslim Brotherhood are then categorized as a fight against colonialism, capitalism, and modernism. Other reactions can be found in the *Mujahideen* struggle against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, and Imam Rouhallah Khomeini’s distaste for the Shah’s secular reforms in Iran (Mahdavi, 2018). The issue here is that Islamist groups can spawn on their own without the need to react to the modern world or the

Western world. As mentioned previously, Islamists base their ideology on the Quran, Hadiths, and Fatwas. They also base their ideology on the teachings of earlier scholars. Scholars such as Ibn Tayyimiyyah, Imam Ghazali, and Imam Ash'ari are all early figures in the Sunni School of Thought and worked to ensure that the Islamic governments of the time remained true to the original message of Islam. (Bulaç, 2012). Understanding that Islamist groups can be reactionary, but not exclusively to the West or modernism, helps explain groups such as the East Turkistan Islamic Party, which opposes the Chinese occupation of Xinjiang.

For the purpose of gathering a concise understanding of Islamism to measure the groups being studied, the following definition is proposed: Islamism is an ideology that derives its understanding from Islamic texts and symbols used to justify goals that present Islam as the solution for political life; often used as a reactionary response to unwelcome changes in a Muslim society coming from outside or within. This definition assumes that Islamist groups use Islam as the means to solve the political issues they face. If the Islamist group is reacting to colonialism or secularism, they will trace their answers to at least some aspects of Islam. It should be noted that the Islamist group does not have to take over the country they operate in to use Islam as a solution. Islamism argues that Islam is the guide for political societies (Berman, 2003). The question then becomes, can Islamists use Islam to guide them to democracy?

## **Defining Democracy**

It should be noted that secularism is essentially thrown out of Islamism's motivations by its leaders. Some may not wish to seek power, such as the original plans of the Muslim Brotherhood not wishing to have the Egyptian presidency, but Islamists object strongly to a more secular society. For that reason, among others, democracy must also be defined to understand

what it is that Islamist groups might find attractive in it. What aspects of democracy do Islamists wish to adopt?

The traditional definition of democracy is 'rule by the people,' yet how are people ruling? Some commentators argue that so long as the government acts in the interests of the people, to serve them or provide for them, then that regime is a democracy. However, this system is not rule by the people, it is only for the people. For some definitions of democracy, the relationship between the governed and government, where the government acts in fulfillment of the wishes of the governed, is enough to constitute democracy (May, 1978). Indeed democracy suggests some form of participation by citizens in the government's decision-making. Citizens can participate in democracies in many ways, whether in protests, civil society, or elections.

Due to multiple additional features scholars and commentators have added to democracy, such as respect for human rights, minorities, and liberal values; it is best to focus on a minimalist definition of democracy. The reason it is best to avoid these extra measures of democracy is because they can create bias. For example, Freedom House categorizes democracy by measuring respect for political rights and civil liberties (Boese, 2019). The issue here is what political rights are appropriate in a given society. Does freedom to assemble mean one can assemble a militia to overthrow a domestic regime? There are natural limits on political and civil liberties in any given society. How far those limits go is categorized by the society in which the limits are set. Iran's compulsory hijab laws are seen as cruel by some Western human rights groups, while France's Burkini ban is seen as cruel by others. Even Freedom House has its fair share of biases regarding Marxist-Leninist countries by systematically downgrading them (Boese, 2019). Applying arbitrary standards to Islamist groups can render their support for aspects of democracy



meaningless. Removing normative biases in defining democracy is needed, and a minimalist definition of democracy is preferable.

Going back to the involvement of the people in governing themselves, one of the easiest forms of popular participation is via elections. As discussed below, there are Islamist groups that demand election reform or participation in elections in the various countries in which they reside. This study uses Joseph Schumpeter's minimalistic definition of democracy as a guide for identifying and comparing Islamist groups' support or lack of support for democracy:

“Democracy is thus that ‘method’ or ‘institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people’s vote’” (Elliot, 1994, pp. 290-291). Schumpeter's definition of democracy is very minimalistic and might miss some of the core values typically associated with democracy. However, this definition removes many of the normative assumptions hidden in more elaborate definitions. Schumpeter's definition puts the emphasis on core aspects of democracy such as elections, which restrain leaders' abilities by having to submit themselves to a competitive system (Elliot, 1994). By defining democracy as a series of competitive elections, the outcome of these elections do not matter, as long as they are competitive and free.

Limiting the definition of democracy to a ‘competitive struggle for the people’s vote’ allows for an easier understanding of what many Islamists may desire. Egypt is a prime example, as it held many elections that were often not considered competitive or free during the years of Hosni Mubarak. The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt desired election reforms to make the struggle for seats in parliament fair and real. In other cases, Islamist groups might view democratic reforms as something against Islam, either because they believe democracy cannot coincide with

Islam, or because they believe that democratization leads to secularism, in which case Islam is no longer the guiding principle for social and political life within the nation.

## **Democracy in Islam**

Since Islamism gathers its ideas from Islamic symbols and sources, support for democracy and elections should be represented in aspects of Islam. While Islam as a religion is not necessarily concerned with democracy or elections, there are ideas within Islam that can lead to an interpretation that is supportive of democracy.

Often Islamism wishes to embody the time of the Rashidun Caliphates, the four “rightly-guided” Caliphs after the death of the Prophet Muhammad (Mozaffari, 2007). The Caliphs were by no means democratic, they exerted full control over the political system and ruled for life. Yet there are some democratic themes, however small they may be, within the appointment of certain Caliphs. The first Caliph, Abu Bakr, was elected by a small group of elites in Medina immediately following the death of the Prophet Muhammad. The Fourth Caliph, Ali, was elected by crowds in Medina following the killing of the Third Caliph, Uthman. While it should be noted the appointments of Abu Bakr and Ali were not organized elections with candidates and institutions in place for running elections, the Sunnah (traditions) of the Companions of Muhammad and their followers show that voting for a leader is theoretically possible within Islam.

While many Islamist groups such as ISIS or the Caliphate Movement want a pure resurrection of the original Caliphate, some Islamist groups, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, see the modern presidency as a replacement for the Caliphate (Kramer, 1993). Islamist groups that want to maintain some form of democracy when it comes to a president ruling over a country can point to the election of the Fourth Caliph, Ali, as a means of showing that popular

support for a leader is crucial in an Islamic State. Islamist groups can also take the debates in the election of Abu Bakr as an example to show that multiple candidates are permissible within Islam. These Islamic symbols that Islamists borrow from can justify elections as a desire for Islamist groups.

Islamic leaders of the past did not rule alone, either. The Prophet Muhammad and the Caliphs that came after him used an Islamic concept called a *shura*. The shura was an act of participation among community members who gave feedback to the leader of the time and consulted with him (Kramer, 1993). The shuras often consisted of tribal elders of Arabia, representing their tribe/clan, who worked together to reach mutual decisions (Rahman, 1984). The shura is one of the greatest symbols of democratic elements in Islam, as it promotes the participation of people, speaking on behalf of a greater population, working together to decide the future of the nation going forward. The shura is comparable to a form of parliament today. Whereas the Caliphate might be equated with the executive branch of government, the shura might be equated with the legislative branch.

Al-Mawardi, the chief judge during the Abbasid Caliphates of Al-Qadir and Al-Qa'im, contributes more to the role of organizing different branches of government in an Islamic system. Al-Mawardi conceptualizes the functions of Islamic government under the leadership, the delegation of the leader (*tawfid*), the shura, and the proper application (*tatbiq*) of Islamic Law (*the Sharia*) (Kramer, 1993). Al-Mawardi thus conceptualizes the roles of executive, legislative, and judicial branches in Islam. Using Al-Mawardi's works, new authors have begun emphasizing the need for more independent shuras that can hold the executive in check, while the need for an independent judiciary has been generally accepted (Kramer, 1993). More independent branches of government can help prevent absolute dictatorship in contemporary government. Islamist

groups' advocacy for more independent judiciaries is a step closer to democracy, while still using Islamic symbols to justify their goals. The Islamic symbols that could support Islamist justifications for democracy are not universally accepted by all Islamist groups, however. A key divide between them often involves the split between different Islamic schools of thought such as *Salafism*, *Shiism*, *Zaydiyyah*, and *Ibadism*.

The second largest Muslim sect are the Shias, who make up roughly 10-13% of the Muslim population (Pew Research, 2010). Shias have a difference of opinion in regard to the first three Rashidun Caliphs. For Shias, the Prophet Muhammad directly elected his son-in-law and cousin, Imam Ali, to succeed him, as Caliph or Imam, after Muhammad's death. Thus the first three Caliphs, who are revered by Sunnis, are seen as usurpers. For these reasons, Shias have historically opposed the Caliphate, excluding the Caliphate of Imam Ali and Imam Al-Hassan, often participating in revolts against the Sunni Caliphs (Chaulia, 2007). The Caliphate is not viewed favorably by Shias, who were persecuted by the Umayyad, Abbasid, and Ottoman Caliphs.

Instead, Shias traditionally tend to emphasize the political value of protest movements, as opposed to direct political power, and the formal political power of Shia *ulema* (scholars) did not occur until Imam Khomeini instituted *Wilayat Al-Faqih* (the belief that rulership of a Muslim nation in the absence of the Twelfth Imam is to be guided by the most knowledgeable jurist) in Iran, transitioning Shia Islamism from movements of protest to establishing order within the society (Ayoob, 1981). Shia Islamist movements are then categorized by uprisings against their oppressors, or to establish a system capable to serve the twelfth, final, and Messianic Imam of the time; as has been done in Iran under *Wilayat Al-Faqih*. Whereas traditional Sunni Islamist

movements are inspired by awe of the Rightly Guided Caliphs, Shia Islamists find their inspiration in the uprisings of their oppressed Imams against the Caliphs.

The uprising and martyrdom of the Third Shia Imam, Imam Al-Hussein, is the guiding principle for Imam Khomeini's Islamist movement, as well as Hezbollah's ideology that the oppressed should rise and take revenge against the oppressors (Deeb, 1998). Imam Al-Hussein rose up against the Umayyad Caliph, Yazid ibn Muawiya, as a means of resisting Yazid's oppression, forced allegiances, and the changing of Islamic/Godly norms (Ahmad, R., 2006). Imam Al-Hussein then became the role model for Shia Islamist movements such as Iran's Islamic Revolution, Hezbollah, and the *Hashd Al-Sha'bi* of Iraq. Imam Al-Hussein is symbolically tied to freedom from unjust rule. In 1979, the Shia-led Organization for the Islamic Revolution (OIR) in Saudi Arabia called for demonstrators to honor the legacy of Imam Al-Hussein to revolt against the Saudis (Jones, 2006) as a means to pursue their demands for democracy in the country (Beranek, 2009). For Shia Islamists, Imam Al-Hussein is the symbol of freedom and justice. Whether or not that freedom is defined as democracy is up to the beholder, but it is possible, as shown by the OIR in Saudi Arabia.

Finally, Shia Islamists have a puzzle to face when it comes to the absence of the current Imam. Shia belief states that absolute loyalty is to be sworn to the Imam of the Time (Szanto, 2018). In early Shia history, this was no issue as the Imams were present and visible, albeit sometimes imprisoned. However, Shias believe the current, twelfth, and final Imam (Imam Muhammad Al-Mehdi) is in hiding and will come back to restore justice on Earth (Szanto, 2018). Shias believe that the Twelfth Imam is destined for Islamic leadership, whereas the Sunni Caliphate system does not place leadership onto specific individuals. During the Occultation of the Twelfth Imam, elite religious scholars are seen as his representatives, with the possibility of

communicating with him (Szanto, 2018). Theoretically, if a Shia scholar advocates for more democratic reforms, it can be seen as legitimate in the eyes of Shia Islamists.

Former Iranian President, Muhammad Khatami, advocated for more liberal democratic rights within Iran while being approved by the Guardian Council and Imam Ali Khamenei. Khatami wasn't the most successful in his endeavor, but he was allowed to pursue those goals within the Islamic system of Iran. Going back to the previous definition of democracy, as a competitive struggle for the people's vote, the Islamist leader of Iran, Imam Khomeini, supported elections. These elections are not completely competitive, as candidates who oppose the Islamic system of governance and Wilayat Al-Faqih are barred from competing; the elections themselves are competitive among the approved candidates, and are constantly supported by the Islamist rulers of Iran.

A third group of Islamists considered here are the Salafis. The Salafis, often equated with Wahabis, believe that the Quran and the Sunnah are the only valid sources of authority, the ancestors (*the Salaf*) are to be followed, and all innovations are to be eliminated from Islam (Anjum, 2016). Salafism shares many of the historical, theological, and jurisprudential beliefs of classical Sunnism. Thus the importance of the shuras and the Rightly Guided Caliphs can help push Salafi Islamists closer to democracy. Ibn Taymiyyah, the early Muslim scholar from whom Salafis take their beliefs, goes even further to say that the application of the Sharia (Islamic Law) is not mandated to the Caliph of the time, but rather to the *Ummah* (the Islamic nation/community) (Anjum, 2016). The emphasis on the people of Islam, as opposed to the leader of Islam, shows a further sign of democracy as 'rule by the people.' Salafi reformist, Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, identifies democracy as a tool for good or bad that can be used by Muslims to resist tyranny, and as part of the core of Islam (Anjum, 2016). Al-Qaradawi's fatwas tend to

support democracy and many Salafi reformists, such as some within the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, use them to advocate for democratic reforms.

Despite Al-Qaradawi's efforts to reform Islamist thinking about democracy, the Muslim Brotherhood itself is not inherently Salafi. Al-Qaradawi and the Muslim Brotherhood have been described as ex-Salafis, but still base their ideology on Salafi leaders such as Ibn Taymiyyah (Anjum, 2016). Salafis such as Abu Baseer have condemned democracy, and urged Salafi movements to stay away from it, on the assumption that it leads to secularism and abandonment of the Sharia (Anjum 2016). However, as mentioned above, for the purposes of this study, democracy is only measured by competitive elections, which can be conducted without secularism. Again Salafi leaders, such as Abu Baseer and others, critique the electoral process of democracy. Since democracy must follow the majority as a result of elections, some Salafi leaders condemn this as it goes against the Quranic principle that often the majority of the people are wrong and go against God (Anjum, 2016). While it is possible to support democracy as a Salafi Islamist by relying on the Salafi-Islamic symbols of authority of the Ummah, there is also a staunch rejection of democracy by other Salafi Islamists using other symbols such as the sovereignty of God over the people, and the idea that democracy can be seen as an innovation.

A complication added to Salafism is the belief that it is forbidden to revolt against a Muslim leader, no matter how authoritarian (Malka, 2015). If non-democratic governments in the Muslim world are to be changed by Salafi Islamists, the notion of rebellion or revolution is not consistent with Salafi belief. This is to not say that there aren't loopholes to get around this predicament. One could declare such a ruler a *kafir* (disbeliever), as was done to the Alawite-Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad. Jihadi-Salafis, such as ISIS and *Al-Qaeda*, argue that their use of violence and uprisings within the Islamic World are justified as a defense against

Western invading forces and the corrupt Arab/Muslim governments they support (Malka, 2015). While the loopholes exist, they do not necessarily lead to democratic outcomes. Jihadi-Salafis, such as Al-Nusra in Syria and *Al-Shabaab* in Kenya and Somalia, have no intention of holding elections or embracing any democratic reforms. However, reformist Salafi movements, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, claim that one can rise against an unjust leader, though they are quick to turn that around when it goes against them. When both secularists and Islamists protested against Egyptian President Mohammad Morsi, members of the Brotherhood were quick to label them as *baghy*, meaning an unjust rebel (Anjum, 2016). Limits on the ability to rise against current regimes undermine the ability of Islamist movements to successfully implement and enforce democratic changes.

### **MSSD: Hamas, the Taliban, and The Muslim Brotherhood**

Having identified the Islamic beliefs and symbols that justify certain Islamist groups' support or distaste for aspects of democracy, it is time to put those theories to the test. The MSSD used for this study analyzes three groups of Islamists that feature various degrees of support for democracy. The three groups used for this MSSD are Hamas, the Muslim Brotherhood, and the Taliban. All three groups represent either ex-Salafi or Salafi reformist ideologies, and are all Sunni. While they operate in three distinct states, their core ideologies often overlap, yet all display different attitudes toward democracy.

The first group that is to be analyzed is the Taliban. The Taliban operates in Afghanistan and following the United States' withdrawal from Afghanistan, it has ruled since 2021. The Taliban emerged almost out of nowhere as a result of the Soviet-Afghan War as rival Mujahideen fighters, once financed by the US, battled against each other. The Taliban represented a possible unifying Islamist force in Afghanistan (Rubin, 2022). The Taliban proved successful in many



parts of Afghanistan, but was at constant war with Afghanistan's Northern Alliance. Initially, the Taliban adopted a Salafi ideology of Islam taught by the Deobandi schools (*madrasas*) in Pakistan, which allowed the Taliban to justify its rule based on God-rationale as opposed to popular consent (Öztürk, 2018). The unimportance of the opinion of the majority goes back to the Salafist idea that the majority is often in the wrong, thus the Taliban had no interest in pursuing democracy when it first began mobilizing.

Eventually, the United States invaded Afghanistan for sheltering Osama bin Laden, resulting in the removal of the Taliban regime, and its replacement by a new, presumably more democratic one. The Taliban continued to fight US and Afghani forces throughout two decades of war. In the meantime, something changed within the Taliban's ideology. What caused this change and when the exact change occurred requires a study of its own, but as the Taliban's Salafi sponsors—Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and the UAE—withdrawed their support for the Islamist group, the Taliban began to withdraw its loyalty from Salafism. Following the Taliban's takeover of Kabul in 2021, Salafi clerics were silenced, beaten, tortured, and some reports suggesting even assassinated by the Taliban (Kidwai, 2022). The crackdowns on Salafis led the Salafi-jihadist group, ISIS-K (the branch of ISIS operating within Afghanistan), to engage in conflict with the Taliban. While the Taliban had not completely rid itself of Salafist ideology, it had begun shifting away from it.

After the Taliban took control over Afghanistan in 2021, the new regime has not acted to democratize in the slightest. Not only has the Taliban limited education abilities for women in the country and the rights of others; but elections, the key measurement of this study, have also been scrapped. Shortly after the new Taliban regime took power, the Independent Election Commission (IEC) was dissolved, as the Taliban saw no need for it ('No need': Taliban dissolves

Afghanistan election commission, 2021). Actions by the Taliban, both before and after the dismissal of Salafism, suggest that the Islamist group has no intent to democratize.

Another Salafi-reformist group to examine is the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt. The Muslim Brotherhood was initially founded in 1928 by Hassan Al-Banna to oppose Western imperialism in Egypt, and embraced Salafi ideas to guide its Islamist agenda (Aknur, 2013). The Muslim Brotherhood has since spread into several other countries; however, there is no real central organization as it is mostly a loose coalition with no one version asserting control over the other (Aknur, 2013). In 1942, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood began supporting ideas of democracy as Al-Banna tried to run in Egyptian elections (Aknur, 2013), rejecting more conservative Salafi beliefs that democracy was not compatible with Islam.

For the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, elections were a great opportunity to achieve some sort of power and status. When President Hosni Mubarak faced increasing opposition from Islamist groups, he allowed more moderate Islamists to participate in elections with certain limitations. In particular, members of the Muslim Brotherhood had to run as independents rather than as a unified party (Aknur, 2013). Despite these moments of electoral opportunities for the Muslim Brotherhood, the organization was hardly free. Egyptian forces often raided Brotherhood offices and suppressed members (Aknur, 2013).

A real democratic opportunity for the Muslim Brotherhood presented itself following the Egyptian protests that ousted Hosni Mubarak. Shortly after Mubarak's fall, the first truly competitive elections were held in Egypt, which first resulted in the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party winning a majority of the parliamentary seats, and in subsequent elections, the presidency with the election of Mohammad Morsi (Aknur, 2013). The Muslim

Brotherhood, following its own interpretation of Islamism, was able to consolidate its ideology with competitive elections: a sign the group supports democracy.

The Morsi presidency was initially greeted with optimism by supporters of democracy. Later the group appeared to return to authoritarianism when Morsi began to remove judicial limitations on himself and to consolidate the power of the Muslim Brotherhood, angering those who were not a part of the Brotherhood but initially supported them (Khan, 2014). There are many ways to interpret the Morsi and the Brotherhood in relation to the Brotherhood's support of democracy. For one, the Muslim Brotherhood can be seen as a beacon for Islamist groups supporting democracy, as they competed fairly in elections. The Brotherhood has routinely supported elections throughout its history, yet, when it came to holding that power, the Brotherhood reverted to a less democratic stance. The Brotherhood never had a chance to prove whether it would or would not hold new elections, since Morsi was ousted before they might have occurred (Khan, 2014). To make matters worse for the Muslim Brotherhood, they were declared a terrorist organization by Egypt and are currently banned from participating in any election or in the government.

From another perspective, Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood never valued elections or democracy at the core of their beliefs. While elections and democracy were the desires of many Brotherhood members, one could argue that elections were the instrumental means, not the goal of the broader organization. The Muslim Brotherhood is an ex-Salafi Islamist group that supported democratic elections, yet the goals of those elections are easily questionable.

The Palestinian offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood— Hamas— is another contender in this MSSD analysis. Due to the Muslim Brotherhood's influence on Hamas, many of its early doctrines resemble those of the Muslim Brotherhood (Hannase, 2020). Hamas in recent times

have distanced themselves from Salafism even more than the Muslim Brotherhood, and can be classified as a classical Sunni Islamist group.

Hamas was initially formed as an Islamist alternative to the secular Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) as a means to resist Israeli occupation of Palestine. Hamas's first experience with elections occurred in 2006. The United States and Israel were not satisfied with possible two-state solution peace talks unless Palestine democratized; thus elections were held in 2006 that led to a Hamas victory in the Palestinian parliament, sparking a dismissal of the legitimacy of the elections by the United States (Knudsen & Ezbidid, 2006). Since then, Palestinian governance has been split in two, with Islamist Hamas governing the Gaza Strip and secular Fatah governing the West Bank.

Despite Hamas not holding an election since 2006, there is still advocacy for democracy within the group. The difference between Hamas vs. the Muslim Brotherhood on this matter is that democracy continues to be one of the end goals for Hamas. While democracy was used as a tool by the Muslim Brotherhood, giving it some popular legitimacy for supporting democracy, with Hamas democracy is one of the end goals of the organization. Within Hamas' "Document of General Principles and Guidelines", democracy is mentioned as the core principle of governance within the 'liberated Palestinian State' (A Document of General Principles and Policies, 2017). Essentially, Hamas claims that once Israel is destroyed and the land becomes part of liberated Palestine, democracy will be put into place. While Hamas is not actively engaging in democratic elections at the moment, their official stances toward democracy indicate they support democracy, at least rhetorically, particularly when compared to the Muslim Brotherhood and the Taliban.

**MSSD: Hezbollah, Jamaat-e-Islami, and Hamas**

Whereas the MSSD used for this study examined three different Islamist groups with similar ideological backgrounds but different levels of support for democracy, the MDSD examines three Islamist groups with different ideological backgrounds that have similar levels of support for democracy. The three groups used for this study will be Hezbollah, *Jamaat-e-Islami*, and the return of Hamas for this design. All of these Islamist groups have different ideological backgrounds but still maintain relatively positive support for aspects of democracy.

In 1941, Jamaat-e-Islami was founded in British-occupied India by Abul A'la Al-Maududi as a means of resisting British imperialism and Islamic division (Ahmad, I., 2012). The Islamist group rejected Western-style secular democracy but did not reject democracy as a whole. Instead, Maududi supported some sort of “theodemocratic state” in which the supreme laws of the state are guided by the Sharia, but the executive is elected by qualified people (Ahmad, I., 2012). Despite Al-Maududi’s support for pure Islamic rule, elections are justified due to the classical Sunni examples of the elections of Abu Bakr and Ali. The executive now is a modern version of the Caliph, who still holds the responsibility of implementing the Sharia throughout the nation.

Following the British partition of India, Jamaat-e-Islami was split into two, one operating in Pakistan and the other in India. Jamaat-e-Islami participated in Pakistani elections but the organization had criticisms that Islam wasn’t present enough in the system. Meanwhile in India, Jamaat-e-Islami initially boycotted the elections as they perceived them as un-Godly (Ahmad, I., 2012). As other Muslim groups began participating in Indian elections, Jamaat-e-Islami’s perspective began to change. Jamaat-e-Islami realized that by not participating in Indian elections, they were losing much-needed clout and support. Thus Jamaat-e-Islami leaders began

urging Muslims to participate in elections (Ahmad, I., 2012). Since Jamaat-e-Islami lifted its boycott on elections, the Islamist group has routinely supported elections. Elections are not only seen as the end goal for the group, but as a means of achieving the “theodemocratic state.”

When compared to Jamaat-e-Islami, Hamas’ end goal of a democratic Islamic and liberated Palestinian state is not that much different. The difference tends to rely on the methodology of Hamas compared to Jamaat-e-Islami, as well as the groups’ different ideological backgrounds. Whereas Jamaat-e-Islami might be the classical Sunni Islamist group, Hamas originated from a Salafi-reformist ideology stemming from the Muslim Brotherhood. Not only does Hamas’ original identity differ from that of Jamaat-e-Islami, but the methods to obtain Islamist democracy are also much different, mainly due to political circumstances. Jamaat-e-Islami believes it can routinely participate in elections, while Hamas believes it must liberate itself from an occupying force to achieve that goal of democracy. Hamas has been shown capable of participating in elections and whether or not they are able to realize their goal for a Islamic Democratic Palestine remains to be seen. The ability of Hamas to participate in a competitive election, and update its doctrine to continue that pursuit of democracy, indicates relative support for democracy among the Islamist group.

Lastly, there is Hezbollah in Lebanon. Hezbollah shares some of the characteristics of Hamas, such as identifying itself as a resistance group, being labeled as a terrorist organization by the West, and being financed by Iran; but is substantially different from Jamaat-e-Islami and Hamas in two ways: Hezbollah is a Shia Islamist group and does not seek to be the governing power of its country. As mentioned previously, Shia Islamist groups tend to be more centered around protest/resistance movements, mainly inspired by Imam Al-Hussein’s uprising against Yazid. Thus Hezbollah initially began as an Islamist resistance group that combated American

and Israeli presence in Lebanon, while simultaneously protesting against the Lebanese government (Alagha, 2014). Indeed democracy was not the original intent of Hezbollah, but things began to change in the 1990s. Hezbollah began integrating itself into the Lebanese government, creating the political party *Ifitah*, and competing in elections. Not only did Hezbollah compete in these elections, but Hezbollah's leader, Sayed Hassan Nasrallah, called for a strengthening of democratic institutions that would make Lebanon even stronger than before (Alagha, 2014). Similar to Jamaat-e-Islami, Hezbollah routinely calls for Lebanese citizens to participate in parliamentary elections.

Despite Hezbollah's powerful influence in Lebanon, the Islamist group has not made moves to take over the Lebanese government or install a new Islamic regime. In 2019, a series of protests against the Lebanese government over corruption and a wretched economy erupted across Lebanon. Hezbollah had an opportunity here to seize power but chose not to. Instead, Sayed Nasrallah said he sympathized with the protesters, but believed a larger regime change plan was the plot of foreign powers to make Lebanon weaker, and urged protesters to not participate in the overthrow of Lebanese politicians (Salloukh, 2020). The shift of Hezbollah's stance as a protest movement to one that maintains order in society reflects Shia Islamist beliefs. In the absence of the Twelfth Imam, Shia clerics assume roles as his deputies as a means to help serve him. Hezbollah's determination to maintain order, while resisting/protesting against American, Israeli, and Saudi influence, is in line with the Shia Islamic traditions that Shia Islamists can utilize.

Still, following recent controversies such as the 2019 protests, Hezbollah still calls for Lebanese citizens to participate in elections. Lebanese elections can be competitive, but aren't necessarily fair as candidates are limited because certain seats of government are reserved for

members of different religious sects. Yet, Hezbollah's support for stronger democratic institutions in Lebanon, and its continued faith in democratic elections, indicates that this Islamist group does support aspects of democracy. Despite the differences between Hamas, Jamaat-e-Islami, and Hezbollah, all three groups have relative support for democracy; whether it be an end goal or a means to something else.

## Findings

The results of the MSSD and MDSD analyses do not lend themselves to an easy explanation as to why certain Islamist groups support democracy over others. The MSSD analysis provides evidence suggesting that Islamist groups with similar ideologies (reformist or ex-Salafis) have various degrees of support for democracy. Groups such as Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood vary in how they support aspects of democracy, but nonetheless support it more than the Taliban. Had other non-reformist Salafi Islamist groups been added to the MSSD, such as ISIS, *Boko Haram*, the Al-Nour Party, or HTS, there is a good chance more variations in levels of support for, or opposition to democracy could be identified. Groups like Al-Nour maintain traditional Salafi values but take advantage of Egyptian elections (Aknur, 2013), while other groups like Boko Haram want to completely “jettison democracy” from Nigeria (Nwankpa, 2017).

Another finding is that the MDSD analysis shows that Islamist groups can have a variety of differing ideologies, yet still support democracy. Evidence from the MDSD supports the idea that whether you are a reformist or ex-Salafi, Sunni, or Shia Islamist, support for democracy is possible. Counterarguments are that the more conservative a Salafi Islamist group is, the more likely it is to oppose democracy. However, examples like Al-Nour in Egypt show there are exceptions.



Another possible hypothesis is that Islamist groups that are more nationalistic, meaning they tend to limit their scope to their individual nation within which they operate, are more democratic. More nationalist Islamist groups might have an investment in the current political system, like Hezbollah; or have pride in the success of the nation, like Hamas. Analyzing other more nationalist Islamist groups like *Al-Watan* in Libya and the PMU in Iraq might provide more evidence in support of this finding. Yet Islamist groups like the Taliban, who are very tied to the nation of Afghanistan, do not show any signs of support for democratization. Furthermore, Jamaat-e-Islami in India and Pakistan is anti-nationalistic at its core, partially as a result of its grievances over the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire (Ahmad, I., 2012), yet still supports democracy.

The most reasonable conclusion is that Islamist groups simply choose whether they support democracy or not. The Islamist groups choose which Islamic traditions and symbols they wish to employ to support democracy or to oppose it. Groups like the Muslim Brotherhood have been able to equate symbols of the Caliphate to the modern presidency, while other Islamist groups are able to twist the notion of the Caliphate to oppose democracy. In reality, this study demonstrates that Islamist groups can choose to support or oppose democracy for whatever reasons they see fit. Different ideologies and backgrounds might influence how Islamists approach democracy, but the approach is up to the Islamist group itself, not the ideology to which it prescribes.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, support for democracy among Islamist groups varies from group to group and is context-dependent. Some groups are more enthusiastic about democracy than others. Islamist groups all believe that Islam is the solution for all political problems, and that Islamic

symbols must be used to justify or guide Islamist groups to their goals. Islamist groups that support democracy can take Islamic symbols from the Quran, Hadith, Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad, and Fatwas to justify their views on democracy. Conversely, Islamist groups that oppose democratization will use the same sources to justify their opposition to democracy.

In order to measure and compare support for democracy across these various Islamist groups, democracy needed to be defined in minimalist terms that focus on competitive elections. By eliminating normative notions of democracy, such as popular, cultural, or political support for human rights and other political freedoms, it then becomes possible to fairly assess whether an Islamist group supports democracy or not. To find out whether the particular Islamist ideology a group adopts influences their position toward democracy, evidence from the MSSD and MDSD analyses indicate that Islamist groups from the same Islamist ideology can have various degrees of support for democracy, while Islamist groups from different ideologies can have similar levels of support for democracy. In conclusion, Islamist groups simply choose how they view democracy based on their own interpretations of Islam, their own personal motives, and their political context.

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