

SPOTLIGHTS

What Do the Arab People Want?

Comparative Project on Religious Fundamentalism in the Middle East

Dr. Mansoor Moaddel

In this article I will discuss the Arab Spring and its probable future in light of the findings from our project's comparative national surveys carried out in Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia last year. Funded by the HSCB Modeling Program, this project's goals include understanding religious fundamentalism, trends in values, and attitudes toward Westernization and violence.

In contrast to the backdrop of radical Islamism, the surveys we conducted showed that 84% of Egyptians and 66% of Lebanese regarded democracy and economic prosperity as the Arab Spring's goal. In both countries, only about 9% believed that these movements aimed to establish an Islamic government (see the

changed dramatically: those defining themselves primarily as Egyptians rose to 50%, while those defining themselves as Muslims dropped to 48%. Among Iraqis, self-identification as Iraqis jumped from 23% of respondents in 2004 to 57% in 2011. Among Saudis, the figure rose from 17% in 2003 to 46% in 2011, while the share of those asserting a primary Muslim identity dropped from 75% to 44%.

There has also been a shift toward secular politics and weakening support for implementing sharia. Among Iraqis, the percentage of those who agreed that Iraq would be a better place if religion and politics were separated increased from 50% in 2004 to almost 70% in 2011. Although we do not have the same data for Egypt and Saudi Arabia, both countries show a decline in support for sharia. In Egypt, those considering it "very important" for government to implement sharia declined from 48% in 2001 to 28% in 2011. For Saudis, the figure fell from 69% in 2003 to 31% to 2011.

Finally, an analysis of a nationally representative sample of 3,500 Egyptian adults showed that participants in the anti-Mubarak movement were more likely to be younger single males with higher socioeconomic status, users of the Internet, newspaper readers, urban residents, and believers in modern values and free will. They did not mind having Americans, British, or French as neighbors. Religiosity did not predict participation, while religious intolerance reduced participation.

These figures seem at odds with the results of Egypt's recent parliamentary election, in which the Muslim Brothers and the Salafi fundamentalists together received about 70% of the vote. It remains true that religion is important for Egyptians, as 66% of those surveyed "strongly agree" or "agree" that it would be better if people with strong

religious faith held public office, and 57% consider a government's implementation of sharia "very important" or "important." However, 78% agreed with the statement that it would be better if more people with a strong commitment to national interests rather than with strong religious views held public office.

How, then, to explain these inconsistencies? First, the religious groups, the Muslim Brothers, in particular, benefited from years of political activism, and thus were better able to mobilize their supporters, whereas the liberals, who led the uprising against the former regime, lacked nationwide organization and had little time to translate their newly acquired political capital into votes.

Second, the liberals' priorities were misplaced. Instead of advancing their agenda among Egyptians, they focused on the wrong enemy, spending invaluable time organizing rallies against the army.

Finally, the election outcome is not as bad as it appears. Liberalism has been under continuous attack for decades from religious extremists, and liberal organizations were stifled by oppressive rules. If the Mubarak regime had fallen under the banner of political Islam, Muslim fundamentalists would have been in a much better position to advance more exclusivist claims over the revolution and the country. But it was the liberals who delivered Egypt from authoritarianism. This, in turn, brought legitimacy to liberalism and generated the powerful feeling of nationalist awareness among Egyptians. As a result, support for sharia declined and national identity soared. Insofar as political discourse is focused on national rebuilding and freedom, Islamic fundamentalists, in Egypt and elsewhere, will face an uphill battle.

More data are necessary for a better understanding of the process of change in the Arab world. Given that the Arab Spring caught observers by surprise, the findings from our comparative values surveys may be useful in formulating a sound diplomacy toward Arab countries that serves both U.S. national interests and peace in the region.

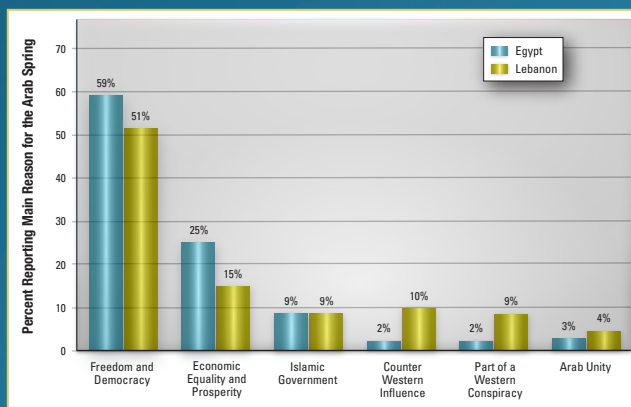


Figure 1. Percent Egyptians and Lebanese indicating the goals of the Arab Spring (sample size: 3,500 for Egypt and 3,000 for Lebanon)

figure below).

For Egypt, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia, the Arab Spring reflected a significant shift in people's values. In 2001, only 8% of Egyptians defined themselves primarily as Egyptians, while 81% defined themselves as Muslims. In the wake of the Arab Spring, however, these numbers