



# Arab Reform Initiative

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## Project introduction

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Islamist, leftist, and liberal forces have repeatedly come together in joint frameworks established on the basis of specific programmes that put ideological considerations aside in order to give priority to political accord over topics of an urgent nature. First and foremost among these topics has been the fight against repression, and in the longer term the question of democracy in general.

## Impetus

1. The entrenchment of political and civil rights has been regarded as a necessary precondition for restoring the potential for participation in public affairs. As the lack of such rights leads to a total paralysis of political and social life, a general conclusion was reached that the struggle for basic political and civil rights was a priority. This is an extremely important point as it has formed the basis of joint political programmes.
2. Because regimes have played on the contradictions between various political forces - sometimes to use one to strike another, sometimes to isolate them one by one - the parties have been in agreement over the need to come together over a common minimum programme based on resistance to repression.
3. The convergence of these forces was not a given. They had never before ventured to work together. It was therefore not possible to achieve this agreement without separating ideology from politics, and without distinguishing between the principles and the strategies of the movements, in order to identify joint priorities and avoid points of difference.

## Problematiques

Such agreement soon shows its limits on two levels:

1. Most important is the fact that proposing an end to repression quickly



leads to a new stage: the need to build a democratic system, “a new constitution for the country, the separation of powers, free and fair general elections, and definition of the powers of the president.” It is interesting that a similar context has arisen in several places despite different conditions. After addressing the question of the political system, a fundamental demand asserts itself: the constituent assembly. Opposing repression quickly leads to the issue of the legitimacy of the existing regime. In this context, the various forces are eager to distinguish between the “regime,” i.e. the ruling authorities, and the “state” as an objective public institution. They are also keen to uphold the principles of peaceful change and non-violence and to avoid political coups, which they consider to be part of the formulation of their approach to building the democratic regime strived for.

The transition from confronting oppression to broaching the issue of the regime legitimacy means that the amount of damage done to the Arab societies concerned – in terms of their dynamism and ability to express themselves, to generate and select forces to represent them, and in terms of mechanisms for shaping a social consensus over an alternative regime – has been so great that they have needed to revert to their formative stage.

However, the minimal agreement is threatened whenever the need arises to elaborate on specific points. Do all the parties want to replace the regime or do some of them want to compel it to accept them as partners? What will the future regime be like? And what guarantee is there that none of the parties will seize exclusive control?

2. Secondly, the points of differences that were set aside, as agreed, rear their heads once more, threatening the original agreement, and even making it appear to be no longer valid or urgent: political pluralism, determining the scope and method of implementing freedom of thought and freedom of lifestyle, priorities in foreign policy, positions on women’s rights, the imposition of the veil, or more generally the application of the Shari’ah as a source or basis for legislation (and which Shari’ah? Here there is a question of interpretation), etc...

There are also other factors that add to the tensions that accompany these



two issues:

- The first is the imbalance in the political weight of the various movements that make up these alliances. For example, over the last three decades at least, the weight of the Islamist forces on the street has increased enormously, while the influence of the leftist and liberal forces has declined. As a result, the parties opposed to the Islamists are no longer able to establish a balance of power to hold them in check, something that casts greater suspicions surrounding the alliance.
- Nevertheless, in spite of the above, there is arguably still a sense of “superiority” among the leftist and liberal forces towards the Islamic movements, which they sweepingly label as obscurantist or populist, or else approach as a deaf bloc, and regard the differences between its constituent elements to be cosmetic, trivial, artificial, etc...
- There is a permanent suspicion that regimes have a powerful motivation to co-opt the Islamists, or at least some of them. In fact, the regimes employ tactics that alternate between severe repression of the Islamists and reaching a truce with them. Regardless, this means that Islamists enter as actors into the calculations of regimes, if not as their central concern, which is not the case with the other political forces. Thus, the requirements made of the Islamist movement differ from those of other forces. And this necessarily has an impact on their behaviour and calculations, both overt and implicit, which upsets their relations with their allies. One can observe a similar situation in the theory of “moderate Islam” that has been elaborated by the hegemonic world powers, and which opens the door to relations with most Islamic political forces. Some of these relationships are already in place, while others remain a possibility.
- Additionally, the “authoritative” character of religion grants the Islamists a sort of “immunity” that often hinders any discussions



or criticism, as well as the freedom to differ or enter into a conflict with them. In other words, it is easy for people to confuse religion in general with a political movement that has a religious ideology, and the Islamist movement has readily made demagogic use of this confusion.

- Finally, the lack of any common intellectual roots among these forces makes itself felt, as does the different vocabulary they employ (for example, “democracy” does not equate to the Qur’anic concept of “Shura” [mutual consultation], and there are different interpretations of freedom of religion with respect to the Qur’anic passage “there is no compulsion in religion”). Furthermore the social programmes that have been declared are vague, and there are misgivings that stem from the bitter experiences of past years, the repression practised by the existing Islamic regimes, etc...

## Practical Experiences as a Basis

The idea of such alliances has been proposed throughout the Arab world and has provoked both political and theoretical discussions.

The following examples may be cited:

1. The numerous attempts made by various Iraqi political forces to reach alliance agreements, in particular after the First Gulf War, and what subsequently happened to these alliances following their establishment. The Iraqi experience was one of the first in this regard. It is unique because it has been put into practice outside Iraq when the various forces were exiled, and because the most well-known of them – the Iraqi National Congress – was directly and organically linked to international parties.
2. The Egyptian Movement for Change – Kifayah – which was founded in September 2004 with the official objective of opposing an additional term



in office for President Hosni Mubarak and the bequeathing of the presidency to his son. The movement then announced its working programme, the most important points of which were: “the immediate repeal of the State of Emergency; to grant right to all peaceful civil forces to organise and form political parties, trade unions, committees and associations; to recognise the right to demonstrate, to strike, and hold peaceful protests; the right to freedom of expression and to publish newspapers.” Established in the same vein, albeit less well-known, are the Kifayah movements in Yemen and Sudan.

3. “The Damascus Declaration for National Democratic Change,” announced on 16 October 2005 and signed by Syrian parties and figures, which was brought into being by the explosive crisis created by the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri and the withdrawal of the Syrian army from Lebanon. Several years earlier, it was preceded by attempts to bring together various political forces; however, they failed to declare a common programme and were overcome by circumstances. The Damascus Declaration states that the signatories agree on “the establishment of a democratic national regime” that must be “peaceful, gradual, founded on accord, and based on dialogue and recognition of the other.” They consider Islam to be the main constitutive cultural element in the life of the nation and the people. They support the building of a modern state based on democracy that guarantees “the freedom of individuals, groups and national minorities to express themselves”, and “finding a just, democratic solution to the Kurdish issue in Syria.” They also undertake to “abolish all forms of exclusion in public life, by suspending the Emergency Law; and abolish martial law and extraordinary courts.”
4. “The 18 October Movement for Rights and Freedoms” in Tunisia, proclaimed in December 2005, which comprises opposition parties – democratic, leftist, and Islamic – as well as civil society organisations. It aims to achieve a balance with the ruling party, which has dominated all aspects of political life in the country since independence in 1956. The movement was launched following a hunger strike jointly carried out by



the leaders of these forces, which represented the culmination of the struggle against the so-called “Anti-Terrorism Law,” issued in 2003, that unleashed a wave of repressive police practices. The 18 October forces agreed over four main demands, namely: freedom of association for all, freedom of expression and the press, the release of political prisoners, and the passage of a law to provide for a general legal amnesty. These demands were regarded as the minimum requirements of democracy.

5. The “Joint Meeting Parties in Yemen,” or the “Alliance of Political Forces for Change” that emerged in 2002 between the Islah Party (the Muslim Brotherhood in Yemen), the Ishtiraki (socialist) Party, who detain power in the south of Yemen, the “United Nasserite Organisation”, “al Haq” party, The “Unified popular forces”. The alliance continued to function despite their sometimes significant differences on the ground. It recently produced, in partnership with other parties and social forces, a “Draft National Salvation Vision,” at a time when the country faces civil war and risks sliding towards disintegration.
6. In addition, working meetings have been held that were not organised within any specific framework, as in Lebanon, for example, where the Lebanese Communist Party, the Movement of the People (Nasserist), the Free Patriotic Current (liberal), the National Unity Platform (democrat), have worked with Islamist Hizbullah. However, in this case the alliance did not come together in order to combat government repression but is in fact broader. It is based on the experience of the earlier Patriotic Movement alliance that brought together leftists, democrats, Arab nationalists, and Islamists. There have been similar efforts in Saudi Arabia, as well as the leftist/Arab nationalist/Islamist alliance that recently emerged in Bahrain.

## The Integration of Islamic Forces into the Regime

In order to fulfil its objectives, this study must examine a further dimension of the



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subject, namely ways of integrating Islamic movement into regimes in the Arab world, based on the following models:

- Model 1: Democracy has been achieved, with certain qualifications, but one can see the total integration of Islamic movements into the democratic process. This is the Turkish model, and has no equivalent in the Arab world.
- Model 2: Restricted democracy. This is the Moroccan model of integrating Islamists into the democratic process, and the opposite of the Egyptian model. In the first model, one finds strong state institutions and the political will to integrate Islamic movements, something that does not exist in the Egyptian model.
- Model 3: Democratic elections within a weak or non-existent state. This model represents Palestine, Lebanon, and Iraq.
- Model 4: A closed regime and the absence of a public sphere. This model represents Tunisia and Syria.

## Conclusion

Studying the reasons for the difficulties of founding political alliances that in some cases include Islamic movements, or the reasons for excluding them from participating in the process of gaining power, is one of our present research fields. Tracking the course of alliances that have been established, and the subjects that run through debates within their ranks and which could determine their fate and finally their ultimate outcomes, are all extremely important issues. Also interesting is the fact that recourse to the establishment of these frameworks and their programmes is an expression of the deep crises that grip the societies from which they have emerged. The lack of fundamental rights, the prevalence of oppression, and the monopoly of power all have the potential to disrupt public life entirely. The demands for these rights do, however, reiterate the same basic demands that have been heard for decades. Does the broad agreement reached over these issues



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by ideologically disparate forces constitute a shift in the balance of power sufficient to overcome the crisis?

### Implementation

The Arab Reform Initiative (ARI) serves as an umbrella for critical dialogue through which thorny issues can be posed regarding these kinds of experiences. Also, ARI was as much interested by the intellectual production of documents and analyses during these meetings, than by the process of dialogue in itself.

To lead this project, ARI has put together a group of 22 researchers who have been selected from a number of countries in the Arab world: from Morocco (Abdel Ali Hamieddin, Omar Ihrishane, Ahmed al-Bouz, and Hameed Bohkak), Tunisia (Rasheed Kheshana, Lutfi Hajji, Fathi Belhaj, Rafeeq Abdel Salam), Egypt (Amr Shubaki, Ahmed Bahaedeen Sha'ban, Sameh Fawzi, Hossam Tammam, Hiba Raouf), Syria (Radwan Ziyada and Jamal Barout), Lebanon (Abdel Halim Fadlallah and Sa'adallah Mazra'ani), Saudi Arabic (Ja'afar Al-Shayeb), and Yemen (Mohammed el-Mekhlafi). In addition to their research skills, they all have intellectual and political commitment to the field that reflect the sensitivities of these forces. A task force was established (Nahla Chahal of the ARI, who supervised the project, Amr al Shubaki from the al Ahrām Strategic Studies Centre and Hameed Bohkak of the Center d'Etudes et de Recherches en Sciences Sociales (CERSS) in Morocco, both member-institutes of the ARI's network, Bassma Kodmany and Salam Kawakibi of the ARI). Mohamed el Agati of the Arab Forum for Alternatives in Egypt coordinated logistics.

The research papers from each of the four discussion forums will be posted successively on the ARI website, [www.arab-reform.net](http://www.arab-reform.net), together with the guidelines and programmes of each forum. At the end of the process, a comprehensive research report will be published.

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## About the author



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The Arab Reform Initiative is the leading independent Arab think tank working with expert partners in the Middle East and North Africa and beyond to articulate a home-grown agenda for democratic change. It conducts research and policy analysis and provides a platform for inspirational voices based on the principles of diversity, impartiality and social justice.

- We produce original research informed by local experiences and partner with institutions to achieve impact across the Arab world and globally
- We empower individuals and institutions to develop their own concept of policy solutions
- We mobilize stakeholders to build coalitions for positive change

Our aim is to see vibrant democratic societies emerge and grow in the region.

Founded in 2005, the Arab Reform Initiative is governed by a Plenary of its members and an Executive Committee.

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