

# Better mainstream

## SIMULTANEOUS

around the Middle East and wider Islamic world indicate that the broad movement of "political Islam" has now settled down into three general trends that are important to grasp. Al Qaeda-style terror-warriors are the smallest but most dangerous group, provoking strong American-led military responses. The second group in terms of size and impact comprises Iran and allied, predominantly Shiite, Arab movements in Iraq, Bahrain and Lebanon. They focus on self-empowerment and resisting the hegemonic aims of the United States and Israel.

The third and largest group is made up of predominantly Sunni mainstream Islamists — Hamas, the Muslim Brotherhood, the Turkish Justice and Development Party — who are increasingly engaging in electoral democratic politics, at the local and national levels.

It is important to note several things: There is a wide variety of Islamists, with different goals and tactics, usually initially spurred by local angst. These are evolving rather than static movements, constantly responding to domestic and external stimuli, but always accountable to their home constituencies if they plan to survive and prevail. In a few crucial areas their motivations overlap, though their operational and strategic goals usually differ. They are likely to reconfigure their relationships and alliances in the future, especially in response to external meddling.

## DEVELOPMENTS

### A VIEW FROM THE ARAB WORLD



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This has been something of a typical week in the wide world of contemporary political Islamism. Osama Bin Laden released another threatening audio message. On Monday, three bombs exploded in an Egyptian tourist resort. Turkey's mild Islamist government confronts complex challenges of Kurdish militancy and separatism, growing Turkish nationalism, and a democratic transformation required to meet the terms of joining the European Union. Palestine's elected government headed by Hamas is threatened at home by the rival Fatah movement, and is being strangled from abroad by the US, Europe and Israel.

The Iranian government builds on its announcement of mastering small-scale uranium enrichment by defying and provoking the West and Israel, who are trying to prevent its development of a full nuclear fuel cycle. Lebanon's Hizbullah continues to flex its muscles as the largest and best organised Lebanese political group that is also close to Iran and Syria, but it faces increasingly vocal calls for its disarmament or incorporation into the national armed forces. Mainstream Muslim Brotherhood-style movements in Egypt, Jordan, Morocco and most other Arab countries continue to explore how they can engage in democratic elections in order to share or control power, without being outlawed or emasculated.

The common denominator among all the Islamist trends is a shared sense of grievances

against three targets: autocratic Arab regimes that run security states often dominated by a single family; Israel and its negative impact on Arab societies, through direct occupations or indirect political influence on US policy in the region; and the US and other Western powers whose military and political interference in the Middle East continues to anger and harm the majority of people in this region.

All three Islamist trends have responded to these grievances by fostering a combination of ideological defiance against the West, armed resistance against Israel and America, and political challenges against Arab regimes. They part ways, however, when it comes to their tactics and methods: Al Qaeda blows up targets everywhere; the Iranian-Shiite groups focus on political resistance and defiance, often wrapped in revolutionary rhetoric; and Sunni mainstreamers resist militarily when appropriate (Hamas in Palestine), but more often concentrate on playing and winning the political game on the strength of their impressive numbers and organisation, Turkey's Justice and Development with the best performance to date.

Throughout the Middle East and other Islamic lands, citizens who seek to become politically involved to change their world have these three options. Two of them — Al Qaeda terror and Iranian-led defiance — are being fought fiercely by the West, and also by some in

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the region. The third option of democratic electoral politics is at a major crossroads now, following the Hamas victory, Hizballah's strong governance role, and the recent solid performance by the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.

If the Hamas-led government is crushed by a combination of American, Israeli, Fatah and Arab pressures, and other Arab Islamists in government are squeezed further, this single largest, mostly Sunni, constituency in the world of "political Islam" will become disillusioned and probably give up on politics. Those who preach robust defiance against the West or who attack it with bombs are likely to gain new adherents, which will only intensify the cycle of violence, defiance, occupation and resistance that now defines and often plagues much of the Middle East.

Should mainstream, peaceful political Islamism be killed and buried, the subsequent landscape could very well see a coming together of five powerful forces that until now generally had been kept separate: Sunni Islamic religious militancy, Arab national sentiment, anti-occupation military resistance, Iranian-Persian nationalism, and regional Shiite empowerment among Arabs and Iranians. Anyone who thinks that we've seen the end of history should hold on to their pants and think again.

*Rami Khouri is a senior Lebanese journalist*