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Islamist parties, Fundamentalist organizations or aspiring Social Democrats: a comparative analysis of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood and Lebanon's Hezbolla

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Abstract: Much analysis and research on Islamist parties and political Islam in general has been produced, with the recent occurrences in the Middle East termed by many as the 'Arab spring' providing further impetus for the production of even more. However in many instances these analyses have been written from a Eurocentric perspective, omitting the context wherein these parties operate, and refusing to allow for the evolution of them. Islamist parties are often portrayed by these as, anti-modern, war-promoting, women-oppressors that need to be opposed at all costs. Thus, this paper seeks to provide a more substantive and nuanced perspective of Islamist parties by comparing the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and Hezbollah. These two parties are compared on their positions' toward democracy, women's rights and the rights of religious minorities; the social services they provide; and whether or not they are involved in terrorist activities. This enables the paper to illustrate the differences between Islamist parties, and elucidate the role context plays in their evolution. Moreover, it enables it to tease out criteria which the international community should use when deciding to recognize and enter into negotiations with Islamist parties. In addition the impact of the Arab spring on the future of Islamist parties is also examined, the argument being that Islamist parties have been and will be one of the biggest beneficiaries of it. Running through this paper is the argument that many Islamist parties have evolved tremendously, and by allowing them to operate, the citizens of these states will derive benefit, and we will further 'de-radicalize' them as their oppositional rhetoric, which is aimed at appealing to the masses, will have to be toned down and pragmatism will prevail.