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**Abstract Only – Work in Progress**

**“A US-Islamist Rapprochement? The Evolution of US Policy toward Political Islam”**

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Out of fear of Islamists coming to power, the US has stood behind some of the Middle East’s most oppressive regimes. This is America’s “democratic dilemma”: while US officials have the stated desire of promoting democracy, they also have aimed in the past to curb the growing power and appeal of Islamists – the very people who would stand to gain most from democratic openings. Can such a dilemma be resolved? This paper explores the evolution of US policy toward political Islam from the early 1990s until the present day, focusing primarily on how the Clinton Administration responded to “Islamist threats” in Algeria and Egypt. Perceived US strategic interests have always been the overriding factors determining the US approach to both democracy promotion and political Islam. Yet, after 9/11, there has been a shift. American policymakers now see promoting democratic reform as a central part of the “war on terrorism.” Authoritarian regimes, it is argued, have created a poisoned political atmosphere conducive to religious extremism and terror. Yet, while the US has taken a more forceful pro-democracy stance in the Arab world, many questions remain unanswered. Is the US ready to accept the results if Islamists come to power through free elections? Will it support the right of moderate Islamists to participate in the political process? In recent months, leading American officials and opinion makers have, for the first time, begun talking seriously about reaching out to moderate Islamists. There is a growing realization in Washington DC policy circles that the Islamists cannot be ignored or wished away. Dialogue, however, is a two-way street. Islamists have remained vehement, at least publicly, in their opposition to all things American. At the same time, however, there has been a growing internal debate within the Jordanian, Egyptian, and Syrian branches of the Muslim Brotherhood about how they can take advantage of prevailing political trends. Moreover, it is no mistake that during the last two years in particular, Islamic parties have become among the most emphatic advocates of democratic reform and have increasingly appropriated the language of western, liberal discourse. Islamists are riding on the “democratic wave” and achieving unprecedented influence and strength in the process. The interests of the US and Islamist parties are converging like never before. The US can “use” Islamic parties to tap into large constituencies and pressure existing authoritarian regimes to move along the path of democratic reform, while Islamist groups, if they approach the situation intelligently, they can continue taking advantage of political openings created by American pressure, especially in countries like Syria and Egypt.