

the MENA Report

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ABOUT THE MENA REPORT

The MENA Report, published monthly by The Cordoba Foundation, provides unique insights and analysis of events and developments in the Middle East and North Africa. Seeking to provide impartial, accurate and authoritative content and analysis. We do this through The Cordoba Foundation's unique access to rare and highly important primary sources in the Middle East and beyond.



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WELCOME

In the April issue of *The MENA Report* we drew our reader's attention to the ideational factors in Middle Eastern politics which shape and decide the outcomes of internal and foreign policies as well as alliances. The danger lies in politics that is constituted with separate and particular sets of moralities making the differences between the various political and religious players more entrenched and very difficult to resolve. It was only roughly eighty years ago that the borders in the Middle East and North Africa were drawn on the map and took the shape that we have come to know today.

The schism between the different national identities that developed in a space of two or three generations irrespective of the shared language, religion and even tribal roots, is an interesting case requiring closer academic study. The national boundaries, essentially imaginary lines that do not constitute any significance on the topography of the land, created a moral significance amongst the people. However, it is important to note that the popular and

government-sponsored paradigm supports close regional (especially Arab) cooperation and eventually political and economic integration. The dichotomy between reality and aspiration more or less shapes the political and popular scenes in the Middle East and North Africa.

Apparently the new national entities, with the advent of Western-style consumerism, economic paradigm and infrastructure, and secular education, nurtured and shaped people's moral and ethical understandings as we will see in the interviews conducted for this edition of *The MENA Report*.

The aforementioned premise is non truer than the malignant troublesome relationship between the two Arab and North African states of Morocco and Algeria. For more than thirty-five years both countries were locked in a bitter political row over the Western Sahara Province. The dispute has become a stumbling block in relation to economic, political and social development cohesion among the Maghreb states. Algeria's unlimited and continuous military and political

support for the Western Saharan nationalists known as the Polisario muddied the political scene in the region. The Algerian regime's stake in the conflict is confusing and vague. Their motivation is opaque and does not correlate with their paradigm of Arab unity, nor does it correspond to the successive Algerian regime's position towards issues like human rights, freedom of expression, and the right of culturally-diverse communities to self-determination.

In reality, Arab regimes like Algeria, Syria, Iraq and Egypt (before the revolution) that have adopted the paradigm of Arab nationalism were no more than political entities run and consumed by tribal coalitions, special interest groups such as the army, police and other security apparatus. Arab nationalism took shape in the 19th century against the Ottoman Empire. It started as a call to relocate the Caliphate (theocratic Islamic rule) from Turkey to the Arab Homeland. These various interest groups cast aside the notion of one Islamic Nation (*ummah*) or at best they used it as an empty rhetoric to woo the religious sentiments of the masses.

The forbearers of Arab nationalism didn't give enough thought to the ethnic and religious diversity in the region which contributed to its demise. In fact it was not more than a race-based attempt to reinvigorate the region void of an identified political, social or economic theory.

Paradoxically, Arab nationalism was dogged by its antithesis (i.e. political Islam) for the past 80 years. The Arab Spring hailed the rise of the idea of Arab and Muslim unity under the auspices of Islamic ideology. Apart from the heavy inheritance of failing economies, social problems, low literacy rates, law and order, and sub Saharan standards of agricultural backwardness and lack of investment in science and technology, the new democratically elected regimes need to be realistic and learn their lessons from the failure of the forebears of Arab nationalism.

It is apparent that there is no general unifying identity that all Arab and Muslim states in the MENA could agree on and lay their cultural specificities aside at least for the time



The recent rise of the Islamists to power in a number of Arab countries is a *sui generis*.

being. Religious sects, creeds and jurisprudence within Islam are much developed and historicised, rendering it difficult to compromise and amalgamate one shared political and national identity. One of the main challenges facing the new Islamist governments is to formulate a workable solution to the cultural and ethnic diversity within and outside the national state in order to avoid the same fate of the disgraced Arab nationalists.

The recent rise of the Islamists to power in a number of Arab countries is a *sui generis*. These blips on the political graph of the Middle East have mountains to climb if they seek to spread their political theory and hegemony over political, social and economic domains in the Middle East and North Africa. Current political and social events in some of the Arab Spring countries proved that the epistemological bias embedded in the cultural scene in the MENA is hugely slanted towards the Western tradition. There is a dire need for a new epistemology that will bridge the gap between Islamic history, tradition and religious paradigm and the

Western theory of knowledge.

Past events proved that neither secular Arab nationalists, nor religious Islamic activists were able to present the masses with real and effective solutions. Particularly, religious scholars and activists seem to write their political doctrine on-the-go by the notion of trial and error. To illustrate, one may look at the Jihadists (*takfiri*) terror campaign in Egypt which lasted for nearly 10 years in the 1990s. But after the wasting of hundreds of innocent lives and millions of dollars in the destruction of private and public property, the Jihadists theologians and activists subjected themselves to a revisionist exercise known as *al-Muaraja'at*. This resulted in them renouncing their rigid and dogmatic beliefs in a series of books and lectures. This sad experience begs the question of the hierarchy of beliefs within the religious mind. If context was the catalyst for the change of beliefs in armed Jihadi struggle then how sanctified are these beliefs, and how can we arrange our priorities in the future if what is sacred today can be rendered profane tomorrow?

Another apt example is the catastrophic moral failure of the Islamic government in Iran in relation to the Syrian conflict. Iran's comprehensive support for the genocide committed by the regime in the name of religious sectarianism makes the Western position of double standards towards the Palestinian issue morally insignificant. There are no moral or intellectual justifications other than sectarian and theocratic racism. We can safely castigate this political model as a total failure, having no salience in the future of the region. It is apparent that the MENA region (regimes and intellectuals) has no clear central epistemological theory at present. They sway from the most ardent materialists, to humanists and theocratic fundamentalists. All these fundamental intellectual positions were part of the Western intellectual scene in the past and the present.

However the traditional cultural and religious specificities in the region make it impossible to harmonise and adopt any of the previously mentioned intellectual mores as a unifying and homogenised tradition. What is probably

most suitable and goes along the religious doctrine and tradition is to adopt a new position which we can call Relativist Fundamentalism. In short, it is the absolute belief in the righteousness of one's creed and ideology but with a total respect for other sets of ideas, ideologies and beliefs, considering them as valid but probably unproven as is always expected in the metaphysical domain. The Islamic religious scriptures lend absolute support for such a position. Why it has not been adopted as the main vehicle for respecting the freedom of expression, belief and association is quite an enigma.

He said, "O my people have you considered: if I should be upon clear evidence from my Lord while He has given me mercy from Himself but it has been made unapparent to you, should we force it upon you while you are averse to it?"

QUR'AN: 11:28



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INTERVIEW WITH SULEIMAN CHINEN

DIRECTOR, AL-RA'ED (THE PIONEER), ALGERIA

THE MENA REPORT RESEARCHERS CONDUCTED INTERVIEWS WITH THREE INFLUENTIAL ISLAMIST POLITICIANS – TWO FROM ALGERIA, ONE FROM IRAQ. WE TRIED OUR BEST TO HIGHLIGHT SOME OF THE ISSUES RAISED ABOVE IN THE CONTEXT OF THE CHALLENGES FACING THEIR SEPARATE NATIONAL ENTITIES.

Our first interview is with Suleiman Chinen, who is an Algerian political activist and one of the founders of the Movement for the Society of Peace (*Harakat Mujtama'a al-Silm / HMS*), formally known as HAMAS. Ideologically, the organisation is aligned with the main tenets of the Muslim Brotherhood. Chinen is the director of al-Ra'ed (the pioneer), a research outfit in Algeria. During the interview, Chinen made it clear that he had severed his links with HMS a long time ago after the founder of the organisation and the charismatic leader Sheikh Mahfudh al-Nahnah passed away in 2003.

The MENA Report: How would you evaluate the status of the Islamic Movement in Algeria in the past few years especially after the fragmentation of HMS into a number of different political entities?

Suleiman Chinen: The Islamic Movement in Algeria in general is passing through a difficult and deep period of transformation as a result of its recent political activism and experience. If we take the moderate trend led by HMS, we can clearly notice that they are going through the process of soul searching. The different strains of the movement are trying to find their way amidst the plethora of political ideas and trends. At the moment all the different groups that were part of one organisation lack real political strategy. Their politics is far from being authentically Islamic and rational. It is sad to see that the Islamists have no defined Islamic political project at a time when this trend has wide popular acceptance in the region

The MENA Report: What are the main reasons for the divisions among the HMS leadership and do you think the regime contributed to the splintering of the organisation?

SC: There are many reasons; at the top of these, as many analysts think, is the decision to participate in government. Consequently the organisation lost its ability to maneuver. The other major reason is the void left by the death of the founder of the organization, Shaykh al-Nahnah -- no one was able to fill the void left behind by his demise. There was a big distance between the personality of the founder and the second batch of leaders. Everyone who participated in the leadership contest were equal in their abilities, charisma and popularity. It is important to point out that many activists decided to leave the party after they were convinced that the second leader, Abu Jerrah al-Sultani, was elected as a result of external pressures rather than being a decision taken from within the organisation.

The MENA Report: From your experience, do you think that a model of an all-encompassing Islamic Movement is viable at this juncture. What do you say to those who believe that the Islamic organisations should be content with their political activism and remain mere political parties?

SC: The secret of the strength of the Islamic Movement is its multi-faceted functions. The social, economic and political domains are vital for the success of the movement. The spiritual aspect is hugely important for the mobilisation of the masses. It is what distinguishes the Islamic Movement from others. However, I think the Islamists need to deepen their search and revisions to promulgate saleable political theories that will put it in the lead to serve our people. They should not be careless and be complacent with their recent successes.

The MENA Report: Do you share the belief of some Arab intellectuals that Arabs and Muslims in general lack a specific and coherent theory of knowledge? They also claim that there is a haphazard approach to epistemology and there isn't a unifying epistemological trend.

SC: Muslims and Arabs in particular suffered the wrath of colonialism for centuries. Western intervention targeted our civilisation and our strains of thought and tradition

before everything else. After we removed the shackles of colonialism we went through a period of dictatorship and total allegiance to the West. For decades we were unable to discuss these issues in a free and unrestricted manner. Hence, I believe it is unfair to castigate the Muslim *Ummah* as a mere imitator or an entity with no indigenous theory of governance steeped into our Islamic history and principles. I am optimistic of the ongoing attempts and huge efforts spent during this era of democratic transformation to create a project for the *Ummah* that will fulfill the needs and aspirations of our people.

The MENA Report: Do you think that the Islamic movements in Algeria and North Africa in general accepted the Western notion of the National State? Or are there many strains of thought among the moderate Islamic movement in particular and the nation state is the first step towards realising the *Ummah* super state?

SC: Despite the religious, tribal, and economic links in North

Africa between the people, the nation state has always been there though not exactly within the present day borders. The moderate Islamic Movement is in an evolutionary phase. There is an understanding of the priorities and the international and local sensitivities. There is a long shot before people reach a realisation of the benefits of close cooperation and integration.

The MENA Report: What happened to the large base of supporters for the Islamic Salvation Front and the Salafiya Jihadiya groups that were locked in a bitter fight with the government in the 1990s? Do you think there is the possibility of a new popular uprising in Algeria? Will it be an armed struggle again?

SC: A large part of these political and armed groups dissipated either into small political parties, non-governmental organisations, and many retired from the political scene. I must say that there are a limited number of people from the Islamic Salvation Front still at loggerheads

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The sad experience of terrorism in Algeria will deter any future move towards violence. There is not a shred of support for such action despite the widespread corruption and mismanagement of our economy.

with the government. They demand from the government that their political rights are reinstated. I must also point to small groups of armed jihadists still in action, though they have no link with the leadership of the Islamic Salvation Front. But this does not negate the front's moral responsibility for the actions of these groups.

The sad experience of terrorism in Algeria will deter any future move towards violence. There is not a shred of support for such action despite the widespread corruption and mismanagement of our economy. I doubt that we will witness any popular movement against the government in Algeria.

The MENA Report: From the experience of current events in Egypt, Libya and Tunisia, do you think that it would have been better if the Islamist parties waited before taking part in government. As you know, the majority of people have negative preconceived ideas constructed by the defunct regimes about the Islamist parties. Some would argue it

would have been better to continue the social, spiritual and political programs for a while before taking the heavy responsibility of dealing with the inherited economic, social and political ills.

SC: Our public opinion demands a quick fix, not understanding the circumstances and context before us. We just emerged from the abyss of dictatorship with all its social, economic and political damage; on the other side, the Islamists in power at the moment realise the need for finding quick solutions. As a result they have been in overdrive to enlist the state's institutions with their nongovernmental social, charitable and economic capacity to help the most affected class of the society. At the same time Islamists are fighting against the anti-revolutionary forces with the sole aim to slow our progress towards a fully-fledged democratic system. Overall, the popular opposition to the new democratic rule is hugely exaggerated by the media. I think we are heading for the political hegemony of political Islam for decades to come.



The Polisario is a political organisation which has legitimate demands that go along with international norms and laws. The Islamic Movement in Algeria is not embarrassed to deal with the demands of the Polisario in a positive manner.

The MENA Report: Can you give us a brief overview of the moderate Islamic movement's position in relation to the ongoing disputes between Algeria and Morocco over the Western Saharan Province?

SC: The conflict has an international dimension contrary to what the Moroccan government says. The dispute is registered in the United Nations as a case of liberation from colonial rule. The Islamic Movement in Algeria believes in the strategic and religious viability of the unity of our Muslim nations, but we don't agree with the notion of forceful unity or the land-grabbing of others without paying due attention to international laws.

The Moroccan government realises this fact which is exactly why it accepted the United Nation's initiatives, but at the same time the Moroccans rejected the referendum on the fate of the Saharan province. The people and the government of Algeria fully back the Sharawi people if they choose to establish their sovereign state or pursue any other choice.

The MENA Report: Does the Islamic Movement in Algeria support the Polisario in their attempt to establish an independent state in the Western Sahara?

SC: The Polisario is a political organisation which has legitimate demands that go along with international norms and laws. The Islamic Movement in Algeria is not embarrassed to deal with the demands of the Polisario in a positive manner. In fact America and many Arab, African and European countries recognise the organisation. The Islamic Movement is in close collaboration on many fronts including helping refugees in dealing with the sad and difficult conditions caused by the Moroccan governments' impediment of United Nation's relief projects.

The MENA Report: What is the opinion of other Islamic trends in Algeria on this issue, do they differ in their strategy and approach?

SC: Other Islamic organisations have no clear position on this issue, though they, in general, do not disagree with the



official policy. This is quite the opposite to what the Arab media that supports “Amir al-Mu’mineen” (The Moroccan King)¹ say. The majority of the Islamists in Algeria reject the Moroccan policy of refusing to allow the people of the Western Sahara to decide their fate in a referendum. Moroccan intransigence lost the region an opportunity of cooperation and development. Without a referendum on the fate of the Western Sahara, economic and political integration is not possible in North Africa.

The MENA Report: If, as the Algerian government claims, it has no territorial demands from Morocco in the Western Saharan province; why do you think that successive Algerian governments supported a cessationist organisation which resulted in 35 years of tension and lost opportunities of economic and political stability and integration?

SC: I take issue with your question as there are several clarifications that needs to be made. The cooperation between the states is governed by specific regulations. The Moroccan government is the party responsible for closing

the border between the two countries. The Moroccan government realised its error and reopened the borders. Algeria has legitimate demands that should be discussed with the Moroccan side. It involves the issues of drug trafficking, security breaches, and the protection of our national economy.

I also take issue with your description of the Polisario as a cessationist organisation. The Polisario is a popular movement locked in a legitimate struggle to win the rights of its people in choosing their destiny in a referendum in the most democratic way.

Our support for the people of the Western Sahara goes along with the principles of the state of Algeria in supporting all the people in Africa, Asia and America to fight colonialism and occupation.

The MENA Report: Do the Islamists in Algeria have an independent position and different solution to resolving the issue. Was there any cooperation between the Algerian



If we are really honest about democracy and do not get caught in a double standards position, we should allow the people of the Western Sahara to decide their fate.

Islamic parties and organisations with their counterparts on the Moroccan side to find a joint solution?

SC: The solution should be reached through the international community and we shouldn't be afraid of the result of the ballot boxes. Only after consulting the ballot boxes, will the people of North Africa be free to pursue their economic and political development and cooperation.

If we are really honest about democracy and do not get caught in a double standards position, we should allow the people of the Western Sahara to decide their fate.

1. It is important to point out that Suleiman Chinin's reference to the Moroccan King as "Amir al-Mu'mineen" (Leader of the Faithful) was a sarcastic reference to highlight the illegitimacy of the king's title)

INTERVIEW WITH ABDULLAH ANAS

LEADING MEMBER IN THE ISLAMIC SALVATION FRONT; EX-DIRECTOR,
OFFICE OF SERVICES FOR THE MUJAHIDEEN, PESHAWAR – PAKISTAN

The second carried out by *The MENA Report* was with a leading figure of the Islamic Salvation Front, Abdullah Anas. A veteran of the Afghan Jihad, Anas directed the *Office of Services for the Mujahiddin* in the city of Peshawar in Pakistan in the late 1980s. Known in Arabic as *Maktab Khadamat al-Mujahidin*, it was founded in 1984 by Shaykh Abdullah Azzam and Osama bin Laden to raise funds and recruit foreign fighters for the war against the Soviets. Nowadays and far from the front lines in Afghanistan, our interviewee runs a satellite TV station, Al-Maghribya, from London which caters for an Arabic speaking audience in North Africa. In 2009, Anas established the thinktank, The Ta'rif Association, which works to promote better understanding of the Afghan Jihad (and conflicts in general) but also promotes understanding and knowledge of issues that divide and cause friction between people.

The MENA Report: Do you agree with those who attribute the constant instability in the MENA to politics based mainly on ideology? The political elite in the region are

more concerned with their ideological schism rather than political programs based on the development of the citizens in the economic, social and political, and human rights spheres. These ideological divisions develop separate sets of moralities which makes reconciliation very difficult.

AA: Your question needs a conference and deep research to reach some sort of understanding of the type of politics and the reasons behind such trends in the MENA. However I can say with confidence that religion is a major factor and a dynamic arbiter in the lives of the people in this region.

If you direct this question to a French politician he will be surprised and would say 'what does religion have to do with politics'? His secular experience does not help him fathom the centrality of religion the MENA region.

Religion is deeply ingrained into the day-to-day lives of our people from Morocco to Afghanistan. I don't mean just the Islamist activists and Islamist politicians who live and

perform religion in the daily lives, but even those who claim to be liberal, socialist and secular. You will not be surprised to see a liberal politician perform pilgrimage or even his daily prayers.

The secular political elite understood this powerful medium. That is why you find that the governments in this region surround themselves with religious councils and advisors. The importance of religion is manifested in the constitutions across the whole region. No ruler is or was able to ignore the centrality of religion.

However, the biggest challenge is how to turn religion into a political ideology that will accept the other and create the space for dialogue and compromise. To move to such a position we need time and experience. We need to move from the abstract ideology and morality that is preached from over the mosque *manabir* (pulpits) to programmes steeped in context.

It is not enough now for the Islamists to preach pure moral

and ethical values without producing the product that people are in dire need of. There is a need to change the difficult economic, social, industrial and political realities for the better.

Religion is central in our lives albeit in different degrees. An Arab liberal politician will be deemed as overtly religious if compared to a Western liberal politician.

I stress that the Islamists have to come down from their paradigm of puritanical principles to the reality of politics and daily life. They need to widen their horizons and test their rigid principles in context to come out in 20 or 30 years with a working model based on our tradition and religious principles. I am optimistic that we will reach the point of political pragmatism which is different than the Western style of pragmatism. Our pragmatism will not contradict the major and main religious principles.

The MENA Report: What, in your opinion is the reason for the splintering of the Islamic parties in Algeria? Do you think the Algerian government had a part to play in this?

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There is no shortage of reasons for reform. The slogans of reform and change are usually prepared in collaboration with the government.

AA: Certainly the state had a role in this division, but the Islamists and the society played their part as well. The fragmentation of the political parties is a phenomenon that behest all ideological and political persuasions not just the Islamists.

If we leave aside the internal reasons such as a clash of personalities, greed, style of leadership and other psychological motives, the government is certainly the main party responsible for the division of the opposition. They have the tools and the resources. They need the opposition to give its authority a gloss of legitimacy, but when the opposition steps a bit further than what the government panned, the result will be a process of creating new leadership to contest the legitimacy of the present one.

In Algeria we have a phenomenon called “reforming the political party”. When, in reality, it is nothing more than government encouragement for the second person in command to contest the leadership of the first in command basing it on the dire need for reforming the party.

There is no shortage of reasons for reform. The slogans of reform and change are usually prepared in collaboration with the government. In Algeria, the state always keeps its channels of communication open with all levels of leadership within the opposition. The relationship is always handy for the government when the need arises to circumvent the political aspirations of a leader or a political party.

The MENA Report: Do you share the belief of some Arab intellectuals that Arabs and Muslims in general lack a specific and coherent theory of knowledge? They also claim that there is a haphazard approach to epistemology and there isn't a unifying epistemological trend.

AA: If you mean authority and the style of governance, then there are three main traditions of authority. The theocracies, dictatorships (ie: military in particular), and civil government. The tradition in Islam has always been based on the participation of all the different groups within the state from the days of the Prophet. The Sunni tradition



Our civilisation was a pioneer in the freedom of thought, religion and beliefs. We got rid of racism 1400 years ago while some European countries still suffer from the stigma and ills of racism and discrimination.

of rule does not claim to have its authority directly linked to the sacred creator such as the Shi'i rule of *Wilayat al-Faqih* (the Authority of the Jurist), which claims to rule via unconditional authority handed down from God. During the time of our Prophet, he used to consult his followers in political and social matters that touched the daily lives of the people and in matters that are considered to be outside the main tenets of creed and the main principles of the religion. If the Prophet used to consult his followers in the running of their worldly matters then it is inconceivable that today's rulers should ignore this principle. The Islamic state from day one was a pluralistic society. The first Islamic state of al-Medina was a melting pot of Muslims, Jews and Christians.

However we still lack the clear and concise understanding of this authentic idea of the civility of Islamic rule. Don't forget our nation states are only 60 or 70 years old. These states are considered infants compared to Britain and France and other European countries. We need generations of experience to

deepen our roots in understanding and postulating a good and sailable theory of governance.

What will help our nations to reach a workable and prudent theory of governance are the latent cultural and intellectual traditions and experiences. We need to free ourselves from the bottleneck of theory. Context is vitally important to tweak these theoretical principles into workable models to create economic, social, scientific and financial progress.

Our civilisation was a pioneer in the freedom of thought, religion and beliefs. We got rid of racism 1400 years ago while some European countries still suffer from the stigma and ills of racism and discrimination to the present day. Most of the Muslim nations lag the West in the industrial, scientific and economic spheres. However, we are far ahead when it comes to the belief in the equality of human beings despite their colour and creed, the sanctity of human lives and the complete and comprehensive metaphysical theory. What we need is to come down from the domain of theory

to practice and to be at the forefront of the nations that will contribute for the betterment of humanity.

The MENA Report: What happened to the broad popular base for the Islamic Salvation Front and the militant Salafi Jihadis in Algeria? Is there any possibility for an Arab spring in Algeria or do you believe that there is a reaction against the violence committed by the Islamists in the 1990s?

AA: The Arab Spring started in Algeria in the early 1990s but without the vital element for its success. There was no Al-Jazeera or other TV station to beam day to day events to millions of people around the globe. Moreover there was no internet or Facebook, and on top of all of this the West was adamant that the Islamists should not be allowed to assume power.

The Egyptian or the Libyan armies were not weaker than the Algerian army, but any move against the people is monitored now.

The MENA Report: Where are the followers of the Islamic Salvation Front?

AA: As a functioning body the Islamic Salvation Front has been defunct since 1992. They have no presence in the political scene in Algeria today. Despite their absence they still command the utmost respect and admiration by the masses because they didn't take part in the financial and political corruption that dogged the country over the past 20 years. They are considered to be the conscience of our people and a model for purity.

The MENA Report: But organisation-wise the Salvation Front does not exist now.

AA: True.

The MENA Report: Do you believe that there is a possibility for a popular uprising against the government akin to what happened in Tunisia and Egypt?



The Islamic Salvation Front needs an urgent reorganisation and to reinvent itself as a new political entity.

AA: Very likely.

I want to point out that the Islamic Salvation Front needs an urgent reorganisation and to reinvent itself as a new political entity. The historic leadership in Algeria and the Diaspora have to convene and work out a plan for the future of the organisation.

The MENA Report: Is there any effort spent in this direction?

AA: Yes there is.

The MENA Report: What is the position of the Salvation Front in regards to the dispute between Algeria and Morocco over the fate of the Polisario and the Western Saharan province? Are you in agreement with the official position?

AA: I cannot give you the exact policy of the Salvation Front but I can, in general provide you with a principled position of many of the organisation's leaders.

The dispute is between the political elite on both sides. People on both sides have no stake in the dispute. As a leading member in the Salvation Front, I can honestly say that 90 million people in the region, known as the Arab Maghreb, have suffered over the past 35 years as a direct result of this dispute. The solution is very simple. As you very well know the Western Sahara is within the borders of the Arab Maghreb. If the borders are opened between our countries and people and goods are allowed to cross freely, the dispute will be resolved. All our countries will be within the borders of one super state.

This political and economic integration will also answer the dreams of a few Algerian politicians to have access to the Atlantic sea. I totally agree that this issue has poisoned the relationship between our countries in North Africa for decades.

The MENA Report: As a political organisation, did you present the government with a plan to solve this contentious issue? Was it different than the official policy?



AA: Our leader Abbas al-Madani presented the Algerian government with a plan to solve the problem but obviously it wasn't received favorably.

The MENA Report: Was it because it sharply differed with the official policy towards the dispute?

AA: I don't want to go into details about this issue.

The MENA Report: As a leading figure in the Salvation Front you must have a theory for the enthusiasm of the successive Algerian government for lending military, economic and political support for the Polisario. They lost the support of 45 million Moroccans and lost opportunities of economic and political integration among 90 million people for the sake of 300 thousand Sahrawi people. There must be a convincing reason for such a strategic policy?

AA: They work on a principle which I personally as an Algerian citizen reject wholeheartedly. It is based on the

premise that if you ignore the Moroccans they will eventually follow you. The late president Hawari Bu Median used to say this. It is a kind of pressure on the Moroccans. On the other side, there are some irresponsible political voices which add to the tension between the two countries. For example, two weeks ago one of the Moroccan political parties proposed the use of force to claim back the region of Tendorf from Algeria. These irresponsible political statements encourage the Algerian government to create more trouble for Morocco to keep it busy.

The MENA Report: I would like to come back to something you said about Algeria's need of a passage to the Atlantic Ocean. This is the first time I've heard about this motive.

AA: As I said earlier, the economic and close political integration would give Algeria an outlet to the Atlantic Ocean.

The MENA Report: But was this motive discussed among the Algerian political elite?



The Islamists will eventually realise their objective of creating real and meaningful change to better the lives of the ordinary citizens that have suffered under the tyranny of the defunct dictatorships over the past 6 decades.

AA: Yes.

The MENA Report: Was there any attempt by the Salvation Front to meet with its counterpart of other Islamic movements in Morocco, such as the movement of Al-Adl wa Al-Ihsan (Justice and Spirituality) to present a solution for the Western Saharan dispute based on the shared principles of Islam?

AA: I am adamant that if the intellectual elites, legitimate political representatives, academics and religious authorities on both sides pending the opportunity to meet, they will find a solution for the dispute in a very short space of time.

The MENA Report: Don't you think that the opportunity is already there with the election of an Islamist prime Minister Abdul Ilah Ben Kiran since 2011? Did he extend an invitation to the Islamic Salvation Front or the Algerian Islamists in general? Finding a solution to this long standing issue will help raise the profile of the Islamists and their project in the region.

AA: I don't consider that being in a position of political authority would necessitate having real authority and influence. We can clearly see what is happening in Libya, Tunisia, and Egypt or even in Algeria with a number of the Islamists from HMS in government. The Islamists are in a difficult position; they are stuck in the bottleneck of politics. However, their situation is far better than what it was before the advent of the Arab spring. Hopefully they will grow in strength and will have real control over the real centres of power and authority such as the army, police, security services and other pivotal ministries.

I know what real power and authority is since I experienced it when we took over Afghanistan with Ahmed Shah Mas'ud after the withdrawal of the Russian forces. We controlled the army, police and all vital government institutions. I am confident that the Islamists will eventually realise their objective of creating real and meaningful change to better the lives of the ordinary citizens that have suffered under the tyranny of the defunct dictatorships over the past 6 decades.

IRAQ ON THE BRINK OF A SECOND CIVIL STRIFE

The latest overture by the Iraqi Prime minister Nouri al-Maliki towards the Kurds signals his readiness to tackle the continuous Sunni demonstrations with more force. News from Iraq indicates that there are covert campaigns of bombing and assassinations against religious, political and tribal leaders associated with the demonstrations.

Until this moment, the new deadly tactics bore fruit against the demonstrators. On April the 23rd, a SWAT team attacked hundreds of picketers in the town of Hawija, southwest of the oil rich city of Kirkuk, killing 44 and wounding nearly 200 people. The demonstrators fled the scene after they were left in no doubt that the Shi'i led government was in no mood for a compromise and that Nouri al-Maliki was now on a Syrian-style course in dealing with the peaceful demonstrators.

According to a witness statement by the Education Minister, Mohamed Tamim, the attack was conducted under direct orders from the Prime Minister and the acting defense Minister Sa'dun al-Dulaimi. On April the 24th, the

international organisation, Human Rights Watch, issued a statement demanding a full and thorough investigation into the events; and that they should not go uninvestigated, and those responsible unpunished as usual.

Immediately afterwards, a parliamentary investigation committee was formed to investigate the massacre. It is important to point out that the leader of the parliament, Osama al-Nujaifi is the last person left standing in the way of Nouri al-Maliki after nearly all other strong Sunni politicians have either been forced to leave Iraq, or criminally indicted by the heavily politicised judiciary.

As expected, and contrary to the government's version of events, the parliamentary investigating committee reached a conclusion that the demonstrators were not armed and that 90% of the dead in the army's' storming incident on the Sit-in Square al-Hawija were shot in the head, abdomen and chest areas. The report was handed over to the Presidency of the parliament to be included in the agenda for read.



There is an atmosphere of fear and anticipation amongst all Iraqis as the sectarian war in neighboring Syria is casting a heavy shadow over Iraq.

Realistically, the report will be shelved with a long list of similar events in a country where there is no clear line that separates the executive from the judiciary. Nor does it have a strong functioning parliament with independent and professional committees.

There is an atmosphere of fear and anticipation amongst all Iraqis as the sectarian war in neighboring Syria is casting a heavy shadow over Iraq. Unconfirmed reports from inside one of the Shi'i militias close to the government indicated that Nouri al-Maliki postponed his plan to attack the demonstrators in the province of al-Anbar after he was assured by the latest gains of the Syrian army against the opposition. However most Sunni politicians anticipate a military attack on the Sunni provinces within the next two months depending on events on the Syrian front; sidelining the Kurds to prevent them lending support to the Sunni's, and the go ahead from the Iranian leadership. Preparations for such a move are ongoing in Baghdad and the surrounding areas. Sectarian motivated assassinations,

bomb attacks against houses of worship and intimidating the civilians in an effort for future ethnic cleansing is very much evident and ongoing though largely unreported by the media.

INTERVIEW WITH PROMINENT POLITICIAN IN AL-IRAQIA SUNNI BLOCK (IRAQI PARLIAMENT)

The MENA Report managed to carry out an interview with a leading Sunni politician with Islamic leaning. He is a member of al-Iraqia Sunni block in the Iraqi parliament. Some of the information we managed to extract from him is revealing. It gives us an insight into Iraqi politics away from the gloss and inaccuracies in the official and opposition media. Furthermore, the interview highlights the weakness and divisions within the Sunni parliament block. We can safely claim that al-Iraqia at the moment is fragmentary, it is divided between the Sunni Islamists, Arab nationalists, tribalists and the limited number of secular Shi'i MPs who chose to side with the Shi'i led government two years ago.

The MENA Report: How do you evaluate the latest local election results in Baghdad and in the Sunni dominated provinces in particular?

The MP: The results indicated that the Islamist trend made a comeback after the poor results of 2010. In all the seats we contested in Salah al-Din, Diyala and Baghdad, the list

of *Mutahiddun* (united) which was allocated the number of 444, won the majority of seats within the different coalitions inside al-Iraqia. As you know, al-Iraqia is a coalition of disparate political persuasions. The Islamists chose to participate in the local elections under a separate list. The biggest losers within al-Iraqia are Salih al-Mutlaq and Jamal al-Karbuli. Both are considered unofficial representatives of the defunct Ba'ath Party. It is apparent that the Sunni electorate wanted to punish both politicians for siding with the government of Nouri al-Maliki against the Sit-ins and demonstrations in the Sunni provinces.

The MENA Report: What about the two biggest Sunni provinces, i.e. Mosul and al-Anbar?

The MP: local elections were postponed in these provinces. Lack of security was the main reason given by the government; however, we believe the main reason is politically motivated. The government feared that it will lose vital allies in these provinces amidst popular anti-

government demonstrations.

The MENA Report: What are your predictions for the results in these two provinces if the election process was not adjourned?

The MP: In Mosul, there is wide support for the Nujaifi family; the list headed by Athil al-Nujaifi the current Governor of Nineveh Province and the brother of the leader of the Iraqi parliament will in no doubt take the lead. However in al-Anbar, the Islamists in coalition with the ex-Finance Minister Dr. Rafe' al-Issawi will take the lead in any future election.

The MENA Report: How do you describe the atmosphere within al-Iraqia group in the light of the latest results?

The MP: There are tensions; some of those who lost in the local elections are trying their best to sour relations between the Islamist trend and Osama al-Nujaifi. We are trying our best to dampen these sentiments and keep the list unified.

The MENA Report: It is obvious that those who won the latest local elections will not be able to form local governments exclusively. How do you describe the current negotiations between the different winning parties?

The MP: Very difficult and annoying. For example, the current governor of the province of Salah al-Din is in coalition with the list that belongs to Nouri al-Maliki. He has total support from the security forces and the central government.

The MENA Report: What, in your opinion is the worst consequences that will follow the sad events in al-Hawija?

The MP: Immediately after al-Hawija we witnessed an increase in attacks against the army and police. While on the opposite side, the attacks on Sunni mosques and religious and political leaders increased many fold by the Shi'i militias. We can clearly sense that there are regional powers encouraging some Sunni groups and activists to be bolder



The Ba'thists, the Sufi armed group al-Tariqa al-Naqshabandiya, al-Majlis al-Siyasi (the political council of the resistance in Iraq), and al-Qaeda are getting supplies of arms and moral encouragement from outside Iraq.

in their attacks. Concurrently, the Iraqi government, Iran, and their militias are trying very hard to draw the Sunnis into war to enable the government to redraw the province boundaries and start a new campaign of ethnic cleansing. The danger is that both the Sunnis and the Shi'is in Iraq are being pressed to confront each other. The Ba'thists, the Sufi armed group al-Tariqa al-Naqshabandiya, al-Majlis al-Siyasi (the political council of the resistance in Iraq), and al-Qaeda are getting supplies of arms and moral encouragement from outside Iraq. Simultaneously, the Iraqi government is liaising with the Militias, such as Jaish al-Mukhtar, A'sa'b ahl al-Haq, and Hezbollah to carry out attacks against Sunni civilians, religious leaders and politicians. These militias have been on high alert especially after the start of the war in neighbouring Syria.

The MENA Report: What is your role as an Iraqi politician to prevent the surge of violence and eventually the fragmentation of the country?

The MP: I myself have been trying very hard to advise the government to be more prudent in dealing with the demands of the demonstrators and stop all the excesses of the security forces and put an end to its support for the militias, but to no avail. I guess the Prime Minister is planning to push for civil war. He is doing quite the opposite of what a prudent politician should do in such a tense political atmosphere. Nouri al-Maliki is driving Iraq into the abyss.

The MENA Report: What do you think should be done to stop Iraq from sliding into civil strife?

The MP: We need to make the OIC, the Organisation of Islamic Conference aware of the dangers. We also need to relay our concerns to the European Union and Western MPs and Politicians. The next civil strife will cost Iraq its beleaguered infrastructure and countless innocent lives. I am very pessimistic.

The MENA Report: How do you weigh the American position

on the current events? We were told by many Iraqi politicians that the Americans have been lending strong support for the premiership of Nouri al-Maliki.

The MP: We are puzzled by this policy. We were told by a number of Arab politicians from the Gulf region that the Americans warned the Gulf States not to lend any financial or military support to the Sunni community in case of an attack by the militias or the Iraqi government. If this is true, it indicates that there are those who lend support to both sides to instigate a war while others would like to leave the Iraqi civilians to the perils of civil war, similar to what is happening in Syria today.

The MENA Report: Do all the Sunni political leadership share your concerns?

The MP: Nouri al-Maliki has been instrumental in politically assassinating his rivals. Nearly all charismatic Sunni leaders were targeted with false terror allegations and removed from

the political scene. Only the leader of the Iraqi parliament is left and I don't have a shadow of a doubt that he will soon be a target, either for political or material assassination. It all started with Adnan al-Dulaimi; then Mohamed al-Dayni; Tariq al-Hashimi, and Rafe' al-Issawi. Only those who created strong links and collaborated with the Iranian government, hence Nouri al-Maliki; saved their careers and their physical presence. Saleh al-Mutlaq is at the top of this list. He was the unofficial candidate for the Ba'ath Party in the general elections of 2010. Sources close to al-Mutlaq were incensed when they discovered that he agreed on a plan to stamp out the Sunni opposition to the prime minister and put an end to the popular uprising by targeting the leadership of the demonstrators.

The MENA Report: Don't you think that you have gone far in antagonising Iran? I don't mean you in particular but part of the religious and political leadership of the Sunni community.



The MP: I quite agree with part of what you said. As a politician I know that Iran is the real and main regional force that has the most influence on the Iraqi government. This fact should be understood. As such, we in the moderate Islamic movement never tried to create animosity with our neighbours. This was never in our strategy. On such unbalanced scales of power it is prudent to be prudent and never push for conflict as the only victims in it will be the innocent civilians.

We need to stop all sorts of regional incitements and encouragements to use violence. I know a number of people in the Gulf leaking money and weapons to militant groups in Iraq. People need to be advised that the best way to vent their anger is in the next general elections in 2014. At the same time we need strong influence, advice and pressure from the international community to be put on the Iraqi government to respect the human rights of its people, stop its infringement on the legislative body and end its politicisation of the judiciary. Without all of the above, Iraq is

doomed as single political entity.

The MENA Report: Where are the Kurds amongst all this mayhem?

The MP: I was in Kurdistan only last week. A high ranking official told me that Nouri al-Maliki agreed to all the demands of the Kurdish delegation that visited Baghdad at the beginning of May. The concessions included paying wages for the Peshmergeh (Regional Kurdish army), allowing the region to strike oil deals with foreign companies, and paying for arming the regional government at the expense of the central government coffers. However, the Kurdish official admitted that they don't trust the prime minister. They know that all these concessions are just a ploy to keep their front quite while he deals with the Sunni provinces in the next month or so.



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