

the MENA Report

ANALYSIS & INSIGHTS
FROM THE **ARAB WORLD**

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ABOUT THE MENA REPORT

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WELCOME



Welcome to the September edition of *The MENA Report*. The month of September was a triumph for Russian diplomacy and Iranian resilience over Western public foreign intervention fatigue and a very cautious American president. Simple, straight to the point authoritarian foreign politics won over a Western bureaucratic and democratic machine. Over the past 15 years, the Iranians have managed to apply the tactics of Aikido, a Japanese martial art, to politics. They joined the rhythm of the Americans in Afghanistan and Iraq to topple their adversaries on both flanks without firing a single shot. They then found an optimal position to apply their religious influence and their local contacts to come out as the main winner of both Western adventures. Syria was no different; the Iranians managed to save their ally from an American aerial attack, albeit for the time being.

It is very likely that the Syrian regime will keep a large part of its chemical weapons stockpile and retain the capability to manufacture it since it will be impossible to force Syria to accept an intrusive search teams akin to what has happened

to Iraq in the 1990s. How much of this success is due to their political skill and alliances rather than a weakness on the side of the American administration? Only time will tell. Realistically, the longer the Asad regime continues, the more strain will be exerted on the sanction-riddled Iranian economy. In reality, Middle Eastern politics is conducted more out of ideology than economic and geopolitical interests.

Hassan Rouhani, the new Iranian president's conciliatory gestures towards the West prompted the American president to be welcoming. He even promised the Iranians a way out of the nuclear issue if the supreme leader declares publically his rejection of militarising their nuclear program. Unsurprisingly the supreme leader Ali Khamenei publicly assured the outside world that Iran will never militarise its nuclear programme.

Cultural differences create an illusion of success when failure could be the only description to a given policy. Western



While Iran builds on its network of friends and vassals to defend its interests, the Gulf States are working hard to sever their links with the growing democratic movement in the region

cultural tradition past the renaissance and the industrial revolution measures success in material well-being while ideologically driven regimes in the Middle East consider their mere survival as success since their main aim is to proselytise and further their ideological reach. Material well-being of their citizens and the ruling elite are considered important, although a secondary issue. This difference in the outlook towards life and death explains the capitulation of the supreme guide “rhetorically” when he felt that they had pushed their politics to the absolute limit and that the survival of their vassals in Syria was more important than local and international posturing.

The biggest losers in the courtship between Rouhani and the US Administration are the weak Gulf States. Soon they will have an ideological adversary with nuclear capability, strong religious connections and committed ethnic minorities within their territories. While Iran builds on its network of friends and vassals to defend its interests, the Gulf States are working hard to sever their links with the growing democratic movement in the region and do all they can to

create difficulties for the nascent democratic governments. The Saudis, the Kuwaitis, and the United Arab Emirates supported and sustained the military coup in Egypt. In the process they sowed the seeds of discontent inside their own countries, thus further weakening the internal front. These regimes depend on oil money and brute force to continue to swim against the tide of time. However, when resources diminish, force becomes the stick and the carrot at the same time signalling the end of Sheikdom politics as we know it today.

Dr Fareed Sabri

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THE **SAUDI** STATE AND ITS SALAFI TRENDS

In light of the military coup in Egypt, the Salafis in the Arab world are facing difficult choices; acquiesce to official policies in Egypt and the Gulf region but risk social antagonism and political obscurity, or return to their apolitical traditional activism by concentrating on enhancing individual and social morality as well as religious education. The later will lose them the attention, activism and membership of the young. It will also limit their sphere of influence in society to places of worship, and maybe college and university campuses, as we have seen in similar circumstances when other Islamist organisations were cornered to limit their activism to moral and religious education.¹

The Salafi strand of Islam, in essence, is a jurisprudential theory and methodology for extrapolating religious opinion from the scriptures. The scriptures are limited in opinion to the context of time and usually general in its tenets, hence religious scholars over the centuries and in particular in the Middle Ages used various methodologies to extract legal judgments, social and political opinion on events, ideas,

social phenomenon, and technological inventions that were previously unknown and have no mention in the scriptures.

This school of thought is as old as Islam, and it is wrong to link it to an 18th century rise in Saudi Arabia. The only difference with the previous theologians of the middle ages is the tendency of the contemporary Salafis to extrapolate the legal opinion primarily from the Hadith (narrations or actions of the Prophet Muhammad) and verses from the Qur'an with less attention given to other intellectual tools used to understand the religious texts. On the popular level, Islam degenerated in the last five or six hundred years into mystical Sufi rituals, centred on veneration of saints and holy men. Sufism developed as sets of teachings centred on pious and ascetic religious figures. It was a sort of reaction to the life of opulence and plenty enjoyed by the inhabitants of the Islamic Empire. At the start in the 9th century, Sufism was in line with the contemporary mainstream religious schools of thought. Intellectually, it relied in its early period on the current mainstream religious resources which were, in effect, a Salafi school.²



When the state adopts a strand of religious doctrine, it is bound to be contested by groups carrying the mantle of reform, religious purity and authenticity.

Though schisms with the mainstream religious tradition began on theological questions such as the delegation of God's powers to the *wali* (saint), the nature of faith and its link to shari'a stipulated righteous deeds and old theories such as that of pantheism, especially after the time when Greek books were translated into Arabic during the Abbasid era. Not all strands of Sufism followed this path of a theological trend since the state and its religious and educational institutions kept a close eye on the new ideas and philosophical trends. On many occasions, the state used capital punishment to protect the purity of its religious doctrine from what is considered as heresy and innovations by Sufi shaykhs.³

In short, Sufism diverged from the mainstream ideology in the centuries that followed the downfall of the Abbasid Empire. It mutated into a spiritual cult where it is claimed that the majority of the scholars in parts of the Muslim world had an affiliation with a *tariqa* (Sufi order).⁴ On the popular level, Sufism mutated into some sort of hedonism and rituals centred on the tomb of saints and their ability to fulfil and

answer people's needs through intercession with God.

Sufism flourished under the Ottoman Empire despite the few occasions when the state turned on a number of Sufi *tariqa* such as the Imperial Farman (imperial decree) of 1812 to abolish the *Bektashi* order. Nonetheless, the Sufi orders flourished as an official and popular tradition to the extent that the shaykhs from the *Naqshabandi* order occupied the official religious position of *Shaykh al-Islam* in the Imperial bureaucracy.

Over the centuries, the religious reform movement especially to counter the effects of Sufism among the masses never abated. Purifying the religious beliefs and rituals was a continuous effort by religious scholars through the centuries. When the state adopts a strand of religious doctrine, it is bound to be contested by groups carrying the mantle of reform and religious purity and authenticity. This is exactly what happened to the Ottomans when a number of Salafis and other reformist movements sprung up over the flanks of the Empire to contest the spread of Sufism at its

weakest point of control. North Africa, the Arabian Peninsula (present-day Saudi Arabia) and Egypt are regions where Salafi religious movements were founded to challenge what they viewed to be the degeneration of the religion and the decline of the Muslim nation.

Modern-day Salafis consider Ahmed Ibn Hanbal (Baghdad/780-855) and Ibn Taymiyya (Damascus 1263-1328) as the forefathers of the Salafi doctrine. Just as any religious dogma, Salafism mutated into a wide range of beliefs and practices. These ranged from the quietest conservative ideology linked to the ruling elite to the other extreme of ultra-Jihadist who stand in opposition to all sorts of modern-day democratic paradigms and their application.

Contemporary Salafi history had also diverged into methods of activism and political ideology. While the forefathers of contemporary Salafis in Egypt and Syria theorised about regenerating the *umma* (Muslim nation) on the political, social and religious level, the Salafis in contemporary Saudi Arabia were content with the religious component of reform.

The rise of the Salafis in Saudi Arabia under the religious leadership of Muhammad bin Abdul-Wahhab (1703-1791) in the second half of the eighteenth century, although contesting the authority of the Ottoman Empire, didn't present an alternative to the political hierarchy of the state. Ottoman authority was nominal; hence perhaps there was no need for Abdul-Wahhab and his followers to present an alternative when they were effectively autonomous. Eventually, the Ottomans managed to annihilate the first Saudi state early in the nineteenth century at the hands of their Egyptian vassals.

It is important to note that the first Saudi state was a culmination of a pact between Muhammad Abdul-Wahhab and the tribal leaders Muhammad bin Saud. Undoubtedly the puritan religious dogma of Abdul-Wahhab had a profound and lasting impression on the tribes in Najd (the central region of the Arabian Peninsula), but at the same time the first success of establishing autonomous rule rooted in an imperative to recreate the Saudi state among descendants of the founder of the first Saudi state in 1744.

Present-day Saudi Arabia, which was established after a series of battles between Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud and the Rashidi tribal federations in the early twentieth century, was a culmination of the aforementioned imperative and British support to limit Ottoman influence over the Gulf region. It was, in essence, a skirmish between the British and the Ottoman Empires through their tribal vassals in the region. Similarly, the British managed to create strong links with the rulers of al-Hijaz (the Western part of Saudi Arabia) and managed to enlist their allegiance against the Ottoman armies during the First World War.

Furthermore, Ibn Saud signed a treaty with the British in 1915 (similar to the secret treaty with the Kuwaiti Emir in 1899). In effect, this facilitated British arms supply and protection in return for the Saudi's full political cooperation.⁵ They were forbidden from contacting any foreign powers without prior consent from the British. The Gulf region and Najd officially became part of the British Empire's vast colonial assets. Despite present and old Saudi rhetoric

that the state was established on the principles of Islamic monotheism, *jihad*, and the perseverance of the Saud family and their tribal allies, the facts, "at least in the third and last Saudi state" prove otherwise since the British embraced and protected the Saudi Kingdom from before the first World War. In reality, this meant the establishment of the new kingdom was more profane and pragmatic in nature, even if it wasn't, as some would argue, an anti-Islamic doctrine of one nation, since they allied themselves with the British Empire against the Muslim Ottomans and their vassals in the region.

Nevertheless, the nascent Saudi state retained a strong Salafi religious trend to legitimise the Saudi families' rule over the rest of the Arab peninsula in the years to come. Saudi Salafism, or to be more accurate, conservative Saudi Salafism was a nationalised version of political Islam -- it is political Islam without its international component. Its only politics was, and still is, to confer religious authority and legitimacy on the royal family.



Surur and other Muslim Brotherhood exiles quickly seized the opportunity to marry aspects of Sayid Qutb's political theory of *al-Hakimiyya* (sovereignty), social justice, and the imperative for a vanguard to establish these principles.

From the 1960s on, a large number of Muslim Brotherhood exiles from Iraq, Syria, and Egypt took refuge in the Saudi Kingdom at the time when the Saudis were at loggerheads with Arab nationalism, communism and socialist ideologies. The new political refugees populated the educational and religious institutions of the Kingdom at a time when there were few indigenous people with the very much needed academic qualifications. Scholars such as Muhammad Mahmud al-Sawwaf (1915-1992), Muhammad Qutb (1919-present), and many others had a profound effect on the education system and on the nurturing of the political aspect of Islam and the imperative to establishing a pan-Islamic state. There is no doubt that the official Saudi and unofficial religious authorities in the Kingdom adopted the rhetoric of Muslim unity and allegiance. However, what they really intended was cooperation and spiritual unity. The political aspect and administrative component of Islam was, and still is clearly lacking among many proponents of Salafism in the kingdom, and certainly among the conservative and quietest strand.

It is also important to note that the influence was not just one way. The Muslim Brotherhood themselves were affected by the puritanical moral approach of the Saudi Salafis and their strict adherence to giving more weight to referencing rather than context and rational analysis.⁶ The most obvious case is Muhammad Surur, a Syrian Muslim Brotherhood member who immigrated to Saudi Arabia in the late 1960s with a number of Syrian activists. He worked as a teacher and consequently managed to create a following in the Saudi kingdom from among his students. What was missing among the Saudi religious community as stipulated earlier was the political dimension and the accompanying activism to realise this dimension. Surur and other Muslim Brotherhood exiles quickly seized the opportunity to marry aspects of Sayid Qutb's (the Egyptian Brotherhood religious and political theorist; also the brother of Muhammad Qutb) political theory of *al-Hakimiyya* (sovereignty), social justice, and the imperative for a vanguard to establish these principles.⁷ Many of the current leading popular religious figures in the Saudi kingdom like Safar al-Hawali and Salman



Salafi orientated movements share the attributes of cults. Like the Sufis, they conglomerate around a charismatic and scholarly personality.

al-Awda were affected by Muhammad Surur and other leading Muslim Brotherhood religious thinking.

The Saudi authority considers this type of religious activism with a political component to be dangerous and corrupting. Surur had to move to Kuwait, then to the United Kingdom in the early 1990s where he also published the Arabic *al-Sunnah* magazine. He established a wide base of followers in Britain among young students from the Gulf States and primarily from among Saudi students. It was obvious that they had some sort of organisational command similar to the organisation of the Muslim Brotherhood diaspora.

Eventually the Sururis met a similar fate to many small organisations when instead of directing their efforts to win more support from the wide base of the Muslim community of students and immigrants, they involved themselves in a bitter struggle with other Muslim organisations to assert their identity and prove their religious authenticity. For example, Sururi activists instead of creating their own Islamic conferences, mosques and other functions to explain their

da'wa (ie. their religious and political ideology) they relied on functions and venues put together by other Islamist groups.⁸ In return, their competitors directed a large chunk of their efforts to discredit them and defend their turf. In support of Surur's detractors, the Saudi government drained their financial life line when they put pressure on their wealthy backers in the Kingdom.

The organisation fizzled away in the UK and in the Gulf region when its founder Shaykh Muhammad Surur left the UK for Jordan and then to Qatar where his political activism is severely checked. Salafi orientated movements share the attributes of cults. Like the Sufis, they conglomerate around a charismatic and scholarly personality. When the charisma of the leader is diminished or his activism is curtailed the organisation, if there is any, would diminish soon after and this is exactly what happened to Muhammad Surur.

This phenomenon of small organisations popping-up from time-to-time from under the garb of the Muslim Brotherhood is usually destined to fail to achieve wide



popular support and continuity for a simple reason. Most of these organisations are a response to a specific local context. For example, the Sururis were not clear about democracy, plurality, human rights and the modern nation state. In fact, its doctrine was almost inflammatory towards other political, ethnic and religious persuasions. It is more suitable and akin to the strict Salafi dogma in the context of local monolithic Saudi society.

The Saudi academic Professor Madawi al-Rasheed, in her paper entitled “Saudi Islamist Euphoria”, asserts that the Saudi Islamists never questioned the legitimacy of the regime with the exception of the militant jihadi branch associated with Osama Bin Laden. For this reason al-Rasheed describes the Islamists in general as “loyal opposition” whose main concern in recent years shifted from moral and ideological discourse to mundane and practical matters relating to criticising corruption, inequality and oppression. She highlighted other more serious criticism of the kingdom, including its poor media strategy, foreign policy and the lack of transparency, inequality and corruption.

In any event, the shift from total moral and spiritual activism to more practical matters relating to the political and social domain is an improvement and a bold step forward for the traditionally known Saudi and Salafi style of Islamic religiosity. It is quite a step forward hurling the traditionally quietest form of the Salafi brand of Islam to a more challenging brand with implicit political demands. It is also important to note that all the religious and political actors apart from the liberal and secular trend moves within the remit of the strict Salafi creed. Even more moderate and politically open movements such as the “clandestine” Muslim Brotherhood in Saudi Arabia are known to have strong Salafi inclinations. Part of it is natural due to the overwhelming Salafi education and environment and partly it is an intended strategy so as not to be rejected by the society or castigated as *mubtadi’a* (“innovators” – viewed negatively as in innovating something new in the religion) and not true to the original and authentic principles of the *din* (religion).

In the strict security environment of Saudi Arabia and in the absence of independent civil bodies and networks, political

activism develops through informal networks of friends, family, and local networks of religious congregations. In the past twenty years, the Saudi government has been engaging in a losing battle against social networking sites, new communication technology, and the intrusive Arab satellite TV stations. Lately the authorities have tried to curtail the messaging services WhatsApp, Viber, and Blackberry Messenger. To illustrate the activism of Saudis on social media, a report by Google suggested that almost 50 percent of people in Saudi Arabia are online in one form or another.⁹ It is estimated that close to 13 million Saudis are on the internet on daily basis.

Another important factor that will decide the future of the kingdom is the large number of young Saudis studying abroad. It is estimated that in the United States alone there are currently about 71 thousand students.¹⁰ While in the United Kingdom the number is closer to 60 thousand. Similarly the Saudi government is seeking other more affordable English-speaking countries to send its students

to such as New Zealand, Australia, South Africa, India and Malaysia.

The Saudi official English-speaking newspaper, *The Arab News*, claims that the number of Saudi students sent to the United States increased by 98% between the years of 2005-2012. Anecdotal evidence points to a similar case in regards to students in New Zealand and Australian educational institutions. This trend indicates the Kingdom's attempt to counter the influence of the growing trend of political Islamisation of the Saudi young population in the past twenty years especially after the first Gulf war.

Radicalisation of Saudi youth is not considered a big threat since security measures have proven to be an effective deterrent, but what they most fear is the marrying of the traditional, moral, and religious conservative Salafai tradition with the political component of other Islamic traditions such as the Muslim Brotherhood, Hizb ut-Tahrir and the Sururis. In the past few years a number of religious personalities



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and social groups surfaced on the local scene to demand more political rights though in an indirect way. In 2009 an unauthorised Saudi civil rights organisation was founded to defend the rights of political prisoners and urge civil action against the state.

The organisation was known by the acronym H.A.S.M. As expected, the organisation was outlawed and the founding members were put on trial in 2012 and 2013.¹¹ Shortly after, a group of Saudi Islamists announced the establishment of al-Umma Party. Unlike HASM, al-Umma Party was candid in its denunciation of the Saudi regime and called for Islamic unity. It is important to note that this inclination to form political parties and civil society organisations is a new phenomenon in the Gulf region especially among proponents of Salafism. The Kuwaiti version of the al-Umma Party was first founded in 2005 by a number of Kuwaiti Salafis like Hakim al-Mutaeri, the ex-general secretary of the Salafi Movement in Kuwait. Then another version of the party was declared by Hasan al-Doqi in the United Arab

Emirates on August 1st, 2012. Al-Doqi is an ex member of the Emirati Muslim Brotherhood. Barely a day after the declaration, the Muslim Brotherhood in the UAE issued a statement disassociating itself from the new party. It also claimed that al-Doqi left the organisation some years earlier.¹²

Reading into the website of the Kuwaiti al-Umma Party one would reach the conclusion that the Salafis in the Gulf region borrowed the political dynamism and the transnational organisational strategy from the Brotherhood. The political *Ikhwanisation* of the Salafis probably explains the kneejerk and exaggerated reaction of the Gulf States to the ascendancy of the proponents of political Islam in general to power in Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia.

Evidence of the transnational strategy is clear when reading into the website of the Kuwaiti al-Umma Party.¹³ On the first page one can read the statements signed jointly by the three Umma parties in Kuwait, the UAE and Saudi



The dilemma facing the Saudi authorities is the democratisation of the Islamic trend and the liberal tendencies of its young and educated generation.

Arabia.¹⁴ Interestingly, and roughly at the same time in April 2012, prominent Salafi scholars in Egypt declared a new political party though they called it *al-Umma al-Masriyya* (the Egyptian Nation). The parallels and the connections are obvious. Adding Egypt to name of the party is probably to counter local Egyptian sensitivities and accusations of transnational loyalties and agenda.

From anecdotal evidence, we can conclude that the Umma Party in the UAE has only a nominal following since the founder declared the party from Turkey. There is no evidence of a following inside the UAE among the indigenous Emirati population which makes up no more than 14% of the total population. The constant worry of being a minority in your own country and the rentier state policy (where the government lavishes financial benefits on its citizens in return for their loyalty) guarantees political apathy.

Back to Saudi Arabia, the past two years have constituted great worry to the Saudi government. The Arab Spring

mobilised some Salafi and Muslim Brotherhood aspirations for more political freedoms, the respect of human rights, and above all, the call to empower the will of the people and turn the Saudi kingdom into a constitutional monarchy.¹⁵ On their website under 'who are we' (من نحن) they posted the following statement:

"We believe in political pluralism, peaceful transfer of power and the right of the people to choose their own government".¹⁶

Such a strong and clear affirmation of the Salafi trend's emulation of Brotherhood-style politics and their belief in the legitimacy of Western-style political theory must have jolted the foundations of the Saudi regime. Therefore, it was understandable that they welcomed the coup against the democratically-elected government in Egypt.

The dilemma facing the Saudi authorities is the democratisation of the Islamic trend and the liberal



tendencies of its young and educated generation. The lack of democratic and cultural institutions has forced the secular elite to develop their separate networks and alliances just like the Islamists outside of state institutions. The competition between the two trends (the Islamists and the secular elites) has always been over the limited space offered by the regimes in the Middle East. Since the competition has always been outside the remit of the democratic institutions (that is, if there was any), the rhetoric has always been dogmatic and ideological. It became a war of existence especially after the demise of Arab nationalism and socialist ideals in the 1970s.

There were attempts to reconcile the two trends. Beirut was the centre for a series of conferences which culminated by founding a working group entitled the Conference of the National and Islamic Trends (*al-Mu'tamar al-Qawmi al-Islami*). However, this attempt was deemed to fail since the proponents of Arab nationalism (many of them close to Syria, Libya and Algeria) opposed the Arab Spring and the

ascendancy of the Islamists. The website of this working group proves the point made earlier, the last joint statement was made in 2010 just before the Arab Spring.¹⁷

In previous editions of *The MENA Report* we put forward the idea that Arab and Middle Eastern politics is conducted in a way akin to tribal associations and alliances. This phenomenon is very much evident in Saudi Arabia. As we showed earlier, the number of Saudi students sent to get educated in the West increased by 98% over the past 4 years. This could be interpreted as an attempt by the Saudi authorities to secularise future generations to counter the increasing influence of the Salafis and the Muslim Brotherhood. What concerns the regime, is the politicisation of the Salafis and their emulation of the Brotherhood trend. However, there is one drawback of this strategy for the Saudi regime. Anecdotal evidence shows that the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist trends were exposed to a gradual effect of ideological secularisation. Their political ideology evolved over the past thirty years to being very

close to the politics of the Christian democratic parties in Western Europe. Despite the Islamist's total and emphatic denial, the signs are all very obvious from the writings of ideologues and organisations such as Rashid al-Ghanouchi (Al-Nahda), Ayad al-Samara'i (Iraqi Islamic Party), the Turkish AKP and Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. The same fate will most certainly apply to the Salafis in Saudi Arabia.

The Saudi regime believes that encouraging secular tendencies in the Kingdom will be limited to social activities and social moralities. However, the new secular elites will not be content in allowing mix gender universities, giving women the right to drive, or relaxing the moral restrictions in the streets of the Kingdom. The population growth in Saudi Arabia was last reported at 2.29 in 2011, according to a World Bank report published in 2012. This fast growing population will demand more power, say in the running of the country and parallel economic growth.¹⁸ The competition this time will be between the state and the new Salafi-inclined political activists over the "hearts and minds"

of the new educated generation. The regime will be the loser if the Salafis manage to evolve their political ideology and legitimise their political strategy through scholarly religious revisions.¹⁹ To win public support and find a niche in the political terrain, the secular trend will have to tap into local rhetoric and recognisable religious referents.

So long as the oil money is flowing coupled with a strict and circumscribed security environment, a sustained contentious social movement will face an uphill struggle. Convincing the ordinary citizen that his future economic, social, and political predicament would improve under a more democratic and plural political system will have to come on the back of ideational factors for which the Salafis and the Brotherhood are better at utilising. It is important to note that the Saudi authorities despised all forms of intellectual and political traits pre the Arab Spring. Proponents of conservative Islam, i.e. the religious establishment associated with the Saudi government, was the only religious or intellectual identity allowed to flourish and be active.



The Saudi government operates an elaborate and extensive Media Empire run by known secular personalities.

In 2006, the late Minister of Interior Crown Prince Nayef bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud vehemently attacked the secular and liberal elites in the Kingdom. He accused them of having links with foreign powers (the usual Middle Eastern charge) and vowed to fight them. Four years earlier he criticised the Muslim Brotherhood and accused them of being behind every single peril that befell the Arabs and Muslims in contemporary times. Such strong words from the Crown Prince identify and reflect the official policy of the Saudi state. However, it is evident that secular rhetoric and secular elite were, and are still being used to fight the proponents of political Islam and the (*ikhwanised*) politicised Salafi trend.

The Saudi government operates an elaborate and extensive Media Empire run by known secular personalities. The continued sharp and intrusive media policy of driving secular ideals and constant attacks on the proponents of political Islam on Saudi satellite TV stations such as the MBC, al-Arabiya, and the official government stations, will erode what is left of the claimed religious legitimacy of the Saudi

Royal family. A sizeable number of Saudi scholars opposed the official government policy of backing the coup against the Islamists in Egypt. In a strong statement signed by 56 prominent Saudi clerics, they declared their surprise and disagreement with the government's support for the coup leaders, calling the coup a criminal act.²⁰

The suppression of popular democratic demands in neighbouring countries is vital for the survival of the Saudi regime. The sell-by-date is long overdue for a number of factors. The first factor is the authentication of Western political ideals by proponents of political Islam. Numerous scholarly articles and books were written in the past thirty years proving to the public that Western-style democracy is not in contradiction with the spirit of the Shari'a and the major moral principles of Islam.

The second factor is the de-legitimisation of the ideational factors that were the pillars that the Saudi regime used to lean on when countering democratic calls and adherence



to international standards of human rights. Secularising the media, education, and countering democratic tendencies in neighbouring countries, left the ruling family with force as the only option left to deal with the dissent.²¹

Finally, the large number of Western-educated citizens will constitute an economic burden on the state coffers. The state has to secure jobs, services, and comfortable standard of living in an economy dependant on the export of oil. This dependency masked internal issues such as the Shi'i demonstrations in the eastern province and the continued incarceration of vocal opposition and religious leaders in the past. Bureaucracy, lack of transparency, and the free ride of thousands of Emirs on the back of the economy, coupled with a lack of accountability, will be deciding factors for the political direction of the young and the increasingly Western-educated population. In such circumstances, the Saudi regime will be at the mercy of one single international factor to ensure its continued label as one of the most ardent rentier states: the price oil.

1. In the 1970s and 1980s the Muslim Brotherhood in Iraq and Syria under immense pressure from the authorities limited their activism to the universities and mosques, hence limiting their reach and influence in the society.
2. *Salafi* is from the word *salaf* or the forefathers, the fathers of the four main schools of jurisprudence based their interpretation the text and the extrapolating laws and social norms and practices mainly from the Qur'an and the Sunna (Traditions of the prophet Muhammad).
3. The Sufi Shaykh al-Hussien Ibn Mansour al-Halaj (858-922) was executed during the reign of the Abbasid Caliph Al-Muqtadir Billah when a court in Baghdad accused him of heresy after he professed his belief in pantheism. It is alleged that he was asked by a Bedouin what was under his robe for which his answer was "God". However this was not the only reason for his execution, he was also accused of contacts with the Isma'ili (one of the Shi'i sects) rebels.
4. In the author's quest to research the political landscape of Iraq in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, it was discovered that the majority of religious scholars of Baghdad followed one sufi school or another.
5. Al-Rasheed, Madawi (1991). *Politics in an Arabian Oasis*, (I.B.Tauris), p.158.
6. All Sunni religious traditions adhere to strict referencing in regards to the paradigm of the Prophet and the holy Qur'an. However, unlike the Salafis they use in conjunction other procedures to extrapolate a legal or moral opinion such as legal analogy (*qiyas*), juristic "preference" (*Istihsan*), custom ('*urf*) and scholarly consensus (*Ijma*).

7. *Al-Hakimiyya* literally means the sovereignty and authority of God's laws over the authority and law of the kings and earthly governments. However there is much in terms of debate which followed when many of the followers of the *Salafiyya al-Jihadia* misinterpreted the *Hakimiyya* as a principle and affirmation of God's sovereignty and creation for the total rejection of the agency of the human being. They rejected the role of the human being to articulate laws and arbitrate in events of disagreement such as the confused understanding of the *Kharijites* during the *Tahkim* (arbitration) at the battle of *Siffin* 657 AD,(37 Hijri).
8. This usually meant trying to persuade people whom they talk to in these venues of the religious authenticity of their *Da'wa* and dissuade them from following others. In the 1980s and 1990s the Muslim Student Society (MSS) which was a Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated organisation used to hold yearly conferences in the UK plus other activities centered around British universities. Saudi Sururi students in particular used to attend these venues and spread around to talk to prospective candidates whom they think had salafi tendencies. Financially, Saudi Sururis were mostly better off compared to students and activists from other countries and organisations. This allowed them to attract more people to their private functions and study circles. Ref. Interview with a number of activists from the MSS in the city of Manchester
9. <http://gulfbusiness.com/2013/04/saudi-web-users-among-most-active-on-social-media/#.UjLbzH-FZ5o>.
10. <http://www.arabnews.com/number-saudi-students-america-6-percent>.
11. Al -Rasheed, Madawi (2013). Essay – “*Saudi Islamist Euphoria*”, ,p5.
12. Statement number 13, 02/08/2012, <http://www.aleslaah.net/site/showthread.php?id=3415>.
13. <http://www.ommahparty.com>
14. Two statements in particular ,first one dated May 30, 2013 .It was a call to boycott Iran and Hezbollah for their support of the Syrian regime, while the second was dated on July 1st, 2013 condemning the Gulf States for their support for the military coup in Egypt .
15. <http://www.islamicommaparty.com/Portals/Content/?info=TkReEpsTjFZbEj0WjJVbU1TWmhjbUK9K3U=.jsp>.
16. Ibid
17. <http://www.islamicnational.org/Home/contents.php?id=810>
18. <http://www.tradingeconomics.com/saudi-arabia/population-growth-annual-percent-wb-data.html>
19. Please refer to the July issue of *The MENA Report*. We conducted a revealing interview with a prominent scholar with a large salafi following. He is also known to be a sympathiser of the Muslim Brotherhood style of pragmatic politics.
20. <http://www.islammemo.cc/akhbar/arab/2013/08/08/178347.html>
21. In the past two years the government embarked on a campaign of incarcerating religious activists and people calling for political reform.

INTERVIEW WITH DR KASSAB AL-UTAIBI

TO SHED MORE LIGHT ON LOCAL SAUDI POLITICS *THE MENA REPORT* CONDUCTED AN INTERVIEW WITH A DR KASSAB AL-UTAIBI, A SAUDI EXILE IN THE UK. AL-UTAIBI DESCRIBES HIMSELF AS A POLITICAL ANALYST

The MENA Report: What is the opposition scene like in Saudi Arabia today?

KU: Well, it is somewhat dispersed with most of its members in London who hold different views. Despite their differing views, they agree on main principles that may formulate a platform to launch real political change inside Saudi Arabia. The opposition can be characterised as Islamic in general. The situation in Saudi Arabia itself has changed, leading to the rise of dissent on social networks. The youth opposition, both male and female, looks wonderful and shows great potential towards addressing national woes.

TMENAR: What are the main objections against the Saudi government?

KU: Due to the Saudi government's totalitarianism and its authoritarian grip on all facets of political and civil life, the objections are rife, ranging from partial reforms to the uprooting of the entire regime. Each has its own point

of view behind which much justice and logic lay. Almost all the objections are of political corruption which is a prelude to other forms of corruption and deterioration of the social, economic, and intellectual facets of life. All the parties agree that the monopoly on power is the catalyst of all evils, but they disagree on how to eradicate this. There is also objection to financial corruption, marginalisation, restrictions on freedom of speech, assembly and movement, and political expression without fear of retaliation. The objections are many and growing with time according to how the government deals with them, due to widespread corruption in the political system.

TMENAR: Are Saudis ready to embrace democracy? What future rule do you, and other opposition forces, desire and demand?

KU: All people are inclined towards democracy. Democracy does not occur overnight; it is a practice and a responsibility that shapes societies and illuminates the path for people to

follow. Saudis are no different and I believe the people are psychologically and politically prepared for change which will usher in equality, equal opportunities, and social justice under a wide umbrella of citizenship through which all rights and responsibilities are assigned. I personally believe in gradual, honest, and responsible steps, i.e. to embark on serious steps towards political reform that can be built upon. I believe that if we had an elected Shura (Consultative) Council with full jurisdiction and independence, it would be a very positive step.

We currently live in an age of institutional states, and the notion of such states in democratic ruling systems entails the distribution of power across the different apparatuses and conforming to laws and regulations, thus enabling a society to practice its life with ease and flexibility. This will lead to developing both the country and the citizens due to the fair distribution of wealth. An elected Shura Council, or a parliament if you will, is of paramount importance. With this, we may have political formula that brings about tangible

progress on the path of democracy, thus guarantying security, hope, participation, and productivity for all.

There are those inside Saudi Arabia who call for a constitutional monarchy – a matter I do not like much as it is extremely difficult to implement and is rejected on psychological and social levels due to the presence of a more plausible and attractive solution. Then there are those outside Saudi Arabia who have their own opinions and political-intellectual tools who wish to uproot the entire existing regime. It is due to the intransigence of the regime in responding to any demands for reform which reformists within the Kingdom or abroad demand a total overhaul of the regime.

TMENAR: In light of current regional developments, is change in Saudi Arabia inevitable or will it take generations?

KU: It is only natural that change is inevitable in times of revolts, and to tell you the truth, Saudi Arabia has all

the ingredients for a revolution. The policy of tyranny, injustice, and lack of opportunities for reform, coupled with a campaign of arbitrary arrests of opposition, will impact hugely on enacting change in the Kingdom. It is a natural outcome of tyrannical policies, and of massive accumulation of injustice, monopoly, insulting citizens, and the total disregard of their rights. Reducing an entire country to the Emir's personality and that of his family is wrong. We only need to look to the revolts and revolutions in the Arab world - Saudi Arabia is no exception to these. It is only natural that people will react which may turn into a revolution that is harmonious with the nature of a tribal society. Saudis realise, now more than ever, that the doors have been shut in their faces, their future is evermore bleak, and their rulers more arrogant and condescending. The people will have no option but to revolt so as to regain their rights and dignity - which is something natural and is in keeping with our religion, intuition, logic, and historical experiences. In addition, there is what I have described as 'the historical moment' in which revolutions spark leaving many wondering why and how this could have happened!

TMENAR: How do you view the role of the Muslim Brotherhood and the Sururi faction in Saudi Arabia? Do they pose a threat to the monarchy and are they popular among the masses?

KU: The Muslim Brotherhood is a prominent group of people; their members have generally been trained and educated from a young age forming views and opinions. But these convictions remain temporal, changeable, and flexible to withstand changes in time and circumstances - a matter that affects individuals therein as well as on intellectual and scientific levels. Some people exaggerate when describing the Brotherhood and divide them on theoretical bases that do not actually exist. So we find a certain person is branded as Ikhwani, the other as a Sururi, and yet another as being a follower of both! I believe these are inaccurate labels, if not false, descriptions to start with. A member of the Brotherhood is no different from other Muslims in terms of dogma, jurisprudence, and worship. People also differ in their ideological and political stances, but in no way does this mean that this person is a member of the Brotherhood



The gravest danger posed to the throne is its own injustice, totalitarianism, and monopoly over power, man, oil, and all other riches.

or otherwise. There are some members of the Brotherhood who oppose the general framework of the movement in practice and theory. You may find a true Salafi – disinterested in power – who agrees on many ideas of his Brotherhood counterparts. So in layman’s terms, a Saudi Muslim Brotherhood member cannot be moulded in a certain way and then have intellectual ideologies and dogmas of the political movement added to him. But to say that they pose a threat to the State is naive and superficial.

The gravest danger posed to the throne is its own injustice, totalitarianism, and monopoly over power, man, oil, and all other riches. Tyranny is the real danger to any regime, especially royal regimes which have devoured all without any ethical or political remorse.

TMENAR: What are the most prevalent religious groups supporting the regime, in particular the throne’s Salafist entourage? What is their justification? Do they have an opinion on the State’s foreign policy which does not correlate with Islamic principles in the opinion of many?

KU: Most of it is an alliance of mutual benefits. Yes, there are those among these Salafis who revere the ruler and abide by his orders as Islamic law once ordered, while others’ allegiance is based on a dogma of sedition. Another alliance of mutual benefit that seems religious and pious at face value also exists, but in reality it is neither. It is the alliance between the corrupt ruler and the fake man of religion. Such is a sacred alliance between two corrupt individuals who care not about the country, but rather themselves. The second assists the first in strengthening his rule and covering his shortcomings, and the first bestows upon the second his mortal graces and public posts for some *fatawa* (religious decrees) against the former’s haters.

The life of the ruler is only sustainable by the existence of the man of religion, who in turn benefits from the ruler’s offerings. Of course, they both agree on the importance of mutual cooperation which leads such men of religion to stand by rulers even if this means deviating from the teachings of Islam. The justifications are always ready and they consider any Islamic text flexible enough to bear any



History has proven [that]... so-called men of religion have used Islam as a tool for their personal and political interests, as well as taming those who oppose them and demand rights.

meaning that they deem fit. If such text proves to be rigid, they would bend and break it so that it 'loosens up' to give legitimacy to the actions of the political authority.

History has proven that these so-called men of religion have used Islam as a tool for their personal and political interests, as well as taming those who oppose them and demand rights. But their lies and deviousness have been exposed; they can no longer fool the masses who care not about them due to their illicit practices and contradictions.

TMENAR: What is your personal view on sectarianism in Saudi Arabia? How may this matter be best solved without causing any public dissent?

KU: Unfortunately, sectarianism does exist and is practiced by all. There is tension and many stifled feelings. But the solution lies in a political system that guarantees the rights and duties of all under a wide umbrella of citizenship which embraces a policy of non-discrimination. Yes, there are mistakes being committed here and there, and there is a

simmering misunderstand that spills over according to the occurrences in our Arab and regional surroundings as we are witnessing in Lebanon and Syria nowadays, and Iran's involvement in both. This reflects negatively on the Shi'a in Saudi Arabia either through the actions of some of its icons or through non-Shi'i views of them.

The Shi'a and the Sunnis will never agree on dogma or jurisprudence, but they don't need to. Life can go on for both despite their differences as long as there is a real and written constitution that assigns responsibility of all in accordance with their rights and duties towards the unity, safety, and stability of the country. Such coexistence can only manifest itself with the end of political tyranny that taints all. Nonetheless, it is important to have dialogue so that harmony may flourish, and to build bridges of trust between citizens of the one country.

TMENAR: Do the tens of thousands of Saudi students studying abroad constitute an intellectual group in Saudi Arabia? Does liberalism have an active presence?

KU: No, they do not form a particular school of thought *per se*. Saudis approach the West with their religious Saudi nature that may be superficial at times. Hence, when these students return home, they are more intellectually at loss than when they first left. Some of them may be exposed to openness, freedom, or liberalism as an immoral culture, thus doing themselves and their religion much wrong. An organised liberal movement does not exist in Saudi Arabia as liberal ideas are in disarray and are non-institutionalised; they are not based on solid convictions regardless of how much I agree or disagree with them. There are no structural connections among its members through which they can form a cohesive body that can confront other ideologies.

Liberalism does not have a popular base, and its voice is barely heard. Unfortunately, its discourse is contradictory and ego-centric. Their projects are irrational, they have no regard for collective efforts, and tools are individual-based and temporal, thus destined to fail. Some liberal icons do exist, but they have exhausted their potential in matters of less priority than others. In a sense, they are no different

from the above-mentioned government entourage in their 'political' stance from the throne even though this contradicts with liberal ideals.

On a personal level, I respect all liberals who are in harmony with their convictions and ideas. My point is that you will find some liberals who are very enthusiastic in criticising Islamic practices and jurisprudence, and who make them the centre of their discussions. These criticisms may be well-founded at times, but the dilemma is that when the State or some of its apparatuses are to blame for a matter, such constructive criticism dissolves into thin air! Hence, it is very wrong to call these people liberals when at best they are selective opportunists.

Liberalism is purer and classier, and these icons are, unfortunately, as far from its true essence as may be. At its core, liberalism is all about acceptance and celebrating pluralism and diversity. Therefore, a real existence of a liberal movement in Saudi Arabia is non-existent.

MESSAGE
Peace One Day and
Jeremy Gilley

'Any moment, whether
think and reflect on what
would be a great
Kofi Annan

PREOCCUPIED WITH QUESTIONS of the nature of humanity and the issue of the non-profit organisation Peace One Day led the process that resulted in formally establishing the first ever annual non-violence on the United Nations Peace One Day's objective now fixed as 21 September – Peace Day around the world, making it been proved The day has already been proved civil society action by individuals world – by 2007 involving an estimated 100 million people (UNDP). Peace Day can be a message of peace, gender, sexual orientation, persuasion. It is an annual together and promote a culture of peace. Peace Day is more than proven as an annual opportunity for ongoing work, including in conflict. In 2007, Peace Day travelled to Afghanistan



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Sustainable Peace for a Sustainable Future

Commemorating the International Day of Peace, 21 September 2012



LEAD ARTICLE BY
DR MUSTAFA CERIC, GRAND MUFTI OF BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA

MESSAGES FROM
Dr Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury
Professor Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu, Secretary General of the Organisation of the Islamic Cooperation
Jeremy Gilley, Founder of Peace One Day
Catriona Robertson, London Boroughs Faiths Network & London Peace Network

FOREWORD BY
ANAS ALTIKRITI, CHIEF EXECUTIVE OF THE CORDOBA FOUNDATION



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CONFERENCE REPORT: WESTERN ACADEMIC RESEARCH AND DOGMATIC ARAB POLITICS

The International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), convened a conference in London between 9-11 September 2013, themed, “The Muslim Brotherhood and The Arab Spring”, to shed light on the Islamist’s rise to power in the Arab world over past two years. The conference was a good opportunity to gauge Western academic responses to the unfolding and fluid events since many of the Western governments will heed some of the recommendations and advice offered by contributors in the conference. It was also an opportunity to listen to political protagonists from Egypt to fathom the deep polarisation of Egyptian society and whether the antagonism and mistrust can be bridged between the political strata that at one time were allies in toppling the Mubarak regime.

The first session was dedicated to Egypt. The first speaker was Marie Vannetzel, an Associate Researcher at the International Centre for Study and Research in Paris (or Sciences Po). Her contribution was entitled “The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood: from clandestinely to power, and

back?”. She started by highlighting the rapid change in the status of the Brotherhood from an illegal but tolerated organisation pre-2010 to ascendancy to power, then the clamp-down by the military on July 3rd, 2013. In this short period the Brotherhood promised and executed a number of policies. She warned against adopting, at face value, the charge of being void of a true political project without deep and proper analysis at least in an empirical capacity. However, she consulted Oliver Roy when he argued in the *Failure of Political Islam* that the Islamists failure is often caused by the dogmatic adherence to the utopia of the Islamic State. She observed that the Brotherhood was anchored in many dimensions. Its political activity is not the only domain, rather the Brotherhood seeks to be active and apply their ideology in general. During the Mubarak years the Brotherhood activists were enmeshed in their long-term plan of building the virtuous individual and the virtuous society. Political activism, media, and educational avenues were severely restricted, making their virtuous activism and charity work the best vehicle for popular legitimacy so as to



The Brotherhood's strategy was not one of *tamkin* but rather one of survival.

enable the organisation to survive despite its illegal status since 1954.

Vannetzel hypothesised about the Brotherhood strategy of (*tamkin*) hegemony over the political system and the state in general after the downfall of the Mubarak regime. The shift is noticed when the Brotherhood leadership pursued a pact with the army (SCAF) to counter the destabilising effect of the continued protest movement. However, it is doubtful there ever being a strategy of *tamkin* where the Brotherhood would usurp the political system and gradually annul the infant democratic process as their protagonist had proposed prior the military coup on July 3rd 2013. In fact, we propose the opposite to this premise. In a number of interviews with leading members of the Brotherhood in Egypt, they were faced with the huge bureaucratic state machine with loyalties and patronages, networks of private businesses linked to the state machine, and gigantic corrupt ministries with vested interests in the old status quo.¹

The Brotherhood's strategy was not one of *tamkin* but rather one of survival. It is too early to pass judgement on recent events without conducting field research and interviews with people who had direct involvement in policy-making. In the July edition of *The MENA Report* we asked one of the members of the defunct Egyptian National Front for Human Rights, which was founded by the elected Shura Council (Consultative Council), about the opposition claims of *tamkin*. The Salafist al-Noor Party claimed that the Brotherhood appointed 16,000 of its members to the state bureaucratic machinery. However, when pressed, al-Noor Party could not prove the appointment of more than 54 people across the entire country.

Context is very important in taking political decisions, especially in the Middle East where democratic traditions and political experience is virtually non-existent. Jum'ā Amin, a prominent Egyptian Brotherhood leader and the author of a number of books on the ideology of the movement, claimed that they reneged on their promise

not to enter the presidential elections because of the fear of the disgraced Mubarak regime returning to power with its apparatus intact through the window of democratic elections. They believed that the opposition was weak and too fragmented. If the Brotherhood did not enter the presidential race, the revolution would have reversed by the army.

Evidence of the instantaneous decision and that the *tamkin* strategy of prior planning was not on the agenda is explained by the disapproval of a number of senior members of the Brotherhood and large sections of the ordinary cadre.

The disappearance of the National Democratic Party (Mubarak's political party), which was the main target for public vilification, the rise of the Salafi political trend, and the secretive structure of the organisation played a major part in diminishing the popularity and credibility of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.

Who needs the conspiracy theory when you have politics conducted on a bed of uncompromising ideological schisms?

This panel included two Egyptian politicians boldly representing the 'pro' and 'anti' military coup. The first to speak was Dr Abdul Mawgoud Dardery, the Foreign Affairs spokesman of the Freedom and Justice Party, the political arm of the Muslim Brotherhood.

The following are the main points of his argument defending the Brotherhood's year in power:

Dardery described the Egyptian culture as a dichotomy between those who oppose the free will of the people and freedom in general and those who believe and aspire for a free society -- and unshackling the will of Egypt on the individual and the national levels. The revolution of the 25th January 2011 against the corrupt Mubarak regime was based on four main demands, freedom, social justice, respect of people's human rights, and dignity.

Historically, the Brotherhood was founded to redress the issue of national dignity and the renaissance of the Egyptian nation after centuries of colonialism. The identity of Egypt at the turn of the twentieth century was not clear. The known Egyptian writer and Minister of Education Taha Hussien asked the following question: what is the future of Egypt? The answers were disparate. There were those who reject the West and its culture in totality.² They were mainly represented by the Salafi trends. The second trend represented the Westernised elite. They accept all Western cultural influence including aspects which are related to Western religious, cultural and historic context and specificities. The third or the middle trend proposes that we delve into our Muslim history and culture to build our future, but at the same time we should be open to good aspects of other cultures including those of the West. This openness to others and the propensity towards accepting change, diversity, and the natural human aspiration for development is embodied by the ideology of the Brotherhood and similar political trends in Egypt.

According to Dardery, the following facts have to be stated in order to understand where the Brotherhood stands in regards to politics and democracy in Egypt.

The founder of the movement participated in parliamentary elections in the 1940s. Democracy was an integral part of the Muslim Brotherhood ideology from its inception. Knowing that the democratic route will ensure the ascendancy of the Brotherhood to power, the successive Egyptian regimes made sure that this route was blocked from 1948 to 1968. During the reign of president Anwar al-Saddat in the 1970s, the political environment was opened-up to a limited degree.

Then Dardery described the corruption and the gerrymandering that was the norm after 2000 and until the start of the revolution in 2010. In 2005, Dardery was a human rights activist, whereby he witnessed first-hand government tactics of barring people from voting for the opposition and stuffing the ballot boxes and incarcerating electoral participants just before the election campaign.



Morsi's main shortcomings... were his failure to reform the corrupt judiciary, police and army. He preferred to leave it to parliament.

After the 2010 revolution, the same bureaucratic state and corrupt institutions remained untouched. The head of the regime was removed while its vital organs remained intact. Dardery cited a few examples of conspiracy of the ministries' against the elected president. A striking example relates to when President Morsi sent an delegation to Port Said to investigate the massacre perpetrated by the *Baltajia* (thugs loyal to the old regime). During their visit, the police and the civil administration took indefinite leave and refused to deal with the judges. Furthermore, other ministries created artificial shortages in the supply of electricity, water, petrol, and other basic services to entice public resentment against the elected government.

Morsi's main shortcomings according to Dardery were his failure to reform the corrupt judiciary, police and army. He preferred to leave it to parliament, but the judiciary was quicker, they annulled the parliament and deprived the president of one of the main tools to exact reform and change Egypt's predicament.

Dardery's final conclusion was that the coup leaders will not refrain from committing crimes against the people of Egypt; nonetheless the Egyptian people tasted freedom and democracy for the first time in decades. The Egyptians turned a page after 2010 and things will never go back as it was before the revolution.

Paradoxically, Dardery's prediction for the chances of the Brotherhood in parliamentary elections in a scenario where the coup had not happened stated that they would not gain more than 20-25% of the total vote. However, after the coup the popularity and the chances for a majority election win were more plausible.

The second speaker was Dr Mohamed Abul Ghar. He was presented as the representative of the secular trend in Egypt, a gynaecologist by profession and the founder and leader of the Egyptian Social Democratic Party.

Abul Ghar was vehement in his attack against the deposed president of Egypt and his Freedom and Justice Party. He



All Arab autocracies in the past 80 years depended on the Arab secular intellectuals to justify their clamp-down on the freedom of the individual and circumscribe the political environment.

used the same list of allegations by the deposed Mubarak regime smearing the Brotherhood with a long list of allegations without proper referencing or evidence to support his claims. This was odd in a conference which was academic and research-oriented, rather than polemics. Strangely enough, after the conference and in a TV interview Abul Ghar accused Western politicians of being Brotherhood appeasers and the Western academic world of being misguided. In an interview with the Egyptian al-Hayat TV he claimed that the West was intent on *Ikhwanising!* the whole of the Middle East.³ Then he continued in the same interview to claim that he managed to alter the perception and beliefs of the academics taking part in the IISS conference from pro-Muslim Brotherhood to being anti.⁴ He also made the outrageous claim that all Western academics he met at the IISS conference were influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood.⁵

The presentations in the conference reflected the deep schism and polarisation between the Egyptian elite and the

lack of respect for the basic principles of human rights and freedom of speech and association. Al-Ghar's speech also reflected the propensity of the secular elite in the Arab world to tolerate massive human rights abuses and the curtailment of individual and co-operate freedoms on the back of fighting alien or different ideologies. All Arab autocracies in the past 80 years depended on the Arab secular intellectuals to justify their clamp-down on the freedom of the individual and circumscribe the political environment.

In a previous issue of *The MENA Report* we proposed that Arab elite, professionals and the various associations promulgate their differences in a tribal fashion where the profession, party or the syndicate becomes the rallying call and the centre stage for the defence of their personal and group interests irrespective of state, international or dominant moral ideals. There are no unifying moral and ethical values that can act as a light house for the plethora of ideological groups.

In a number of interviews with prominent members of the Islamic Movement in the Middle East, nearly all seem in agreement for the need to revisit the priorities of political Islam for the future in the light of recent events in Egypt. Indeed, we have been informed by senior members that there is an urgent need to parallel the organisation's usual commitment to religiosity, piety and ethical values on the personal level with the imperative of educating their members and the masses for the need to understand and respect constitutional legitimacy and international standards of human rights. A few proposed that the moral education which the Brotherhood members adopted and the masses over the past 80 years was not enough to build morally and ethically-sound citizens. They were amazed at the acquiescence and approval of a large section of the secular and the religious elite alike for the rights of their political and ideological adversaries to be usurped and violently crushed.

Leaders of the official religious establishment, human rights activists, secular and liberal elites, and above all, disgruntled

ex-leading members of the Muslim Brotherhood, justified the violence by the coup leaders against the demonstrators under a plethora of guises such as protecting the army's dignity, conserving the national unity, protecting the state's secular ideals, protecting moderate Islam from the extremism of the Salafi trend and so on.

There is a subtle difference between the proponents of moderate political Islam and the wide range of secular strands of thoughts, political ideologies and minority religious groups who claim secular beliefs as a strategy of survival and to keep at bay the proponents of political Islam. In political Islam there is some sort of identified epistemological base to the political and moral values they hold. The identified principles, ideals and spirit (*maqasid*) or premises of the proponents of Shari'a law helps discern points of convergence and divergence with international norms.

The debate within the wide spectrum of the Islamic

movements, between the Salafis and Muslim Brotherhood, between the Salafis themselves, and the Salafis and the Jihadis has been on-going for decades. Evolution of new ideas and practices and the convergence with many aspects of international law has been markedly noticed in the politics of the Brotherhood, Salafis and even some sections of the Jihadis as has been witnessed in the revision process, *Al-Muaraja'at*, in Egypt in the 1990s. This doesn't mean that the Islamists, i.e. those who claim to propose a kind of political Islam with humanistic values that they identify as their own and envision a pragmatic response to existential challenges, had a significant impact on the world scene. Rather, they are trying to promulgate a theory of their own where Western materialism and humanistic values are contoured by the spirit (*maqasid*) of religious moral tenets.

Contrary to the Islamists, the epistemological foundation for the secular Arab movement has no solid foundation. In the past 80 years of the life of the secular Arab state, not even one success story was registered. The failure is not limited to the socialist and leftist's secular elites. Even those who

claim to follow Western democratic traditions, international human rights, norms and laws, and capitalist economy failed in their attempts to create viable states, or at least create dynamic and workable political parties and opposition. For example, the famous Wafd Party in Egypt failed to gain more than 7.67% of the total vote in the parliamentary election of 2011. While Abul Ghar's Egyptian Social Democratic Party only gained 3.15% of the total seats after it allied with a number of small leftist and secular parties. Such a dismal performance in the most fair and free elections demonstrate their failure compared to the Islamist parties such as al-Noor and the Freedom and Justice Party. Their propensity to offset their political failure by supporting the military coup will not earn them popularity or add to their democratic history. As usual, the coup leaders will use these small secular parties to piggyback their way to direct rule. What is clear is that these secular parties were less principled in their democratic pretensions than the Islamists which they always accused of paying lip-service to democracy.

Returning to Abul Ghar's speech, the following represent



some of his “political” assessment of his parliamentary competitors in the 2011 elections, i.e. the Freedom and Justice Party:

- *The FJP and their Muslim Brotherhood mother organisation are terrorists.*
- *They have close links with terrorist organisations.*
- *The Muslim Brotherhood is responsible for the massacre of 67 tourists in Luxor in 1997.*

(Not even the Mubarak regime ever linked the massacre to the Brotherhood; rather the al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya was singled out for these attacks).

- *The Brotherhood is responsible for the latest spat of burning churches in Egypt.*
- *The Brotherhood condemned the attacks on the churches after the military coup.⁶ Furthermore; the Coptic Christian thinker Jamal As'ad accused the Baltajia (Mubarak's militias) in an interview with al-Jazeera.⁷*

- *The Brotherhood stashed “heavy weapons” in Raba'a Square.*

(Not even the government claimed that there were heavy weapons in Raba'a. The definition of heavy weapons included large artillery on wheels, anti-tank recoilless guns, heavy mortars and heavy machine guns).

- *The ordinary members of the Brotherhood do not know that their leaders are terrorists and they don't know that they stash large quantities of weapons*
- *The leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood is geriatric.*
- *(Abul Ghar, the leader of the Egyptian Social Democratic Party, was born in 1940).*
- *The leadership of the Brotherhood does not read books.*
- *Then when he was asked about the fate of 15,000 political prisoners taken by the coup leaders, his answer was to let them rot until their political masters, i.e.: the Brotherhood give up the locations of their stashed weapons.*



Western secular mechanics are imported, ignoring the moral and ethical ideals of the forefathers... of rational thinking and the autonomy of the legislative and judicial powers.

Secularism as a vehicle to usurp power

Abul Ghar is part of the typical Arab secular elite who has little regard for human rights and law and order. After the destruction of the urban centres in the Middle East in 1258 by the Mongol invasion, then the subsequent colonisations by a number of regional and Western powers, the Middle East was void of philosophers and social scientists to search and rationalise solutions linked to local social order and moral and ethical values. In the past two centuries, Arab intellectuals were mainly influenced by European writers of Marxian and non-Marxian persuasions. They came to believe that the plights of the Arab nations are directly linked to the principles of Islam. Those secular elites completely ignore the gradual reform and renaissance movement in the West and its direct link to religious thinkers, philosophers and the clergy. Western secular mechanics are imported, ignoring the moral and ethical ideals of the forefathers and founders of rational thinking and the autonomy of the legislative and judicial powers.

They also ignore the social construct of the West and the economic transformation which had an enormous impact on the patriarchal relationship with the Church and its mode of intellectual interaction and social networks. Importing the discipline without due attention to the historic moral and social context always puts the secular Arab in a minority when it comes to politics leaving force their only ladder to power. This is why over the past 80 to 100 years of the life of the modern Arab state, the tribal and military (which is also tribal in the deep sense of the word) used the secular trend to legitimise their rule irrespective of massive human rights violations. They, i.e. the secular trend, became the ideological tool of vested interests.

The roots of independent thinking are part of Islamic heritage from the 8th and 9th centuries. Had it been given a space and time to prove its worth through the natural dialectical process, the present Arab predicament would have been far better since it would reflect the natural process of rational intellect linked to local and historicised moral and religious values.

Western perspectives on local Arab politics

In the third and final day of the conference, the ninth session was dedicated towards the projection of both the British and the American government perspectives on the issue of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Arab world.

The first speaker was the director of Transnational Threats and Political Risks at the IISS. He was frank in his admission and that of Western politicians is shallow on the subject of political Islam. Hence, most of the information they get is from the Islamists themselves since they will undoubtedly act upon what they theorised or say earlier. He cited the example of Sloath Sar, the Cambodian Khmer Rouge leader who later came to be known as Pol Pot. In the 1960s he wrote a book proposing to return the Cambodian population to year zero by evacuating the cities and forcing the population back to agrarian life and forced labour. Had the West read his book which he wrote before assuming power, they would have anticipated the murder campaign he perpetrated against the people of Cambodia in the 1970s.

The director of Transnational Threats and Political Risks was also unsure whether the proponents of political Islam were a force for good and alternative to extremists' strands of jihadi Islam or whether they will display similar policies when in power. However, he was sure that the rise of the Islamists to power was a step backward for the freedom and rights of women and ethnic and religious minorities. In the past, the policy of the British government with regards to recognising other governments rested on two factors. The first is which government is present and functioning, and the second is whether it is in command of the territories where it exercises its authority. Currently, the British government has to take into account a number of values before recognising new regimes. He continued to say that this is why the Western governments did not shed tears when the Brotherhood-led government was forcefully uprooted.

The second speaker was an American diplomat, the Deputy Chief Mission in the US Embassy in London. She started her presentation by citing the criticism the US government is facing from different sides. The US is accused of being,

among other things, Muslim Brotherhood appeaser, supporter of the Mubarak regime, and at the same time backing the military coup. According to this American diplomat, three factors decide the US government's policy when dealing with foreign regimes.

First, the international law has not changed with regards to dealing with new regimes. US policy encourages dialogue and engagement. The US encouraged the Brotherhood government to be inclusive and carry out the necessary economic and political reforms.

The second factor is to listen to all contradictory voices even when all talk at the same time. The US government talks to all including a few Brotherhood organisations. The US always stresses on the importance of taking part in the political process to make voices heard. The diplomat also said that she considers that the Brotherhood's decision in Jordan to boycott the parliamentary elections will disadvantage their political interest and prevent their voice from being heard.

Finally, she rationalised her country's pragmatic policy in pursuing its vital interests first. When differences arise for example with the Islamists, the priorities of the US government will be to push for the supremacy of values such as the freedom of expression, law and order, the freedom of beliefs and the media.

This last statement probably best describes the gist of American policy in dealing with foreign powers and organisations. Similarly, proponents of political Islam, when in power, displayed a degree of pragmatism and ascribed priority value to dangers and interests rather than restricting their politics to ideological tenets embraced in the activism phase. The Muslim Brotherhood, during their tenure, cooperated with the United States in the conflict between Gaza and Israel in 2012.

Furthermore, president Morsi did not sever the Camp David treaty or posture Egyptian foreign policy to contest Western alliances and economic interests in the Gulf region



The United States... had to contend with lots of criticism from Saudi Arabia and the UAE for having contacts with the Brotherhood government in Egypt.

or anywhere else. Nonetheless, the United States, according to the American diplomat his country had to contend with lots of criticism from Saudi Arabia and the UAE for having contacts with the Brotherhood government in Egypt. He concluded that these two countries were vital for the US economy and in terms of intelligence; hence it is very difficult to ignore their sensitivities.

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1. The Foreign Policy magazine published an article by Mark Perry detailing the link between the Ministry of Interior and the drug trade in the Egyptian cities. http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/08/23/the_hidden_power_of_egypt_s_drug_running_cops
 2. Taha Hussein (November 15, 1889—October 28, 1973). He was a professor of History, Greek and Roman literature at Cairo University. In 1950, he was appointed a Minister of Knowledge (Ministry of Education nowadays)
 3. <http://www.masrawy.com/news/egypt/politics/2013/september/11/5715533.aspx>
 4. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c33747s2F3k>.
 5. *Ibid.* minute 5:20.
 6. <http://www.ikhwanonline.com/Article.aspx?ArtID=161431&SecID=390>
 7. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hCRKWvwRG60#t=33>. The interview was conducted on Aug 27 2013.

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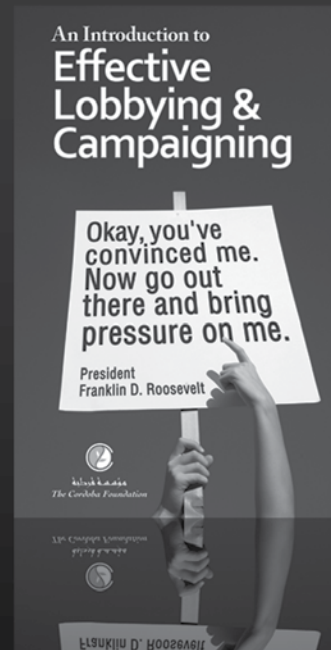
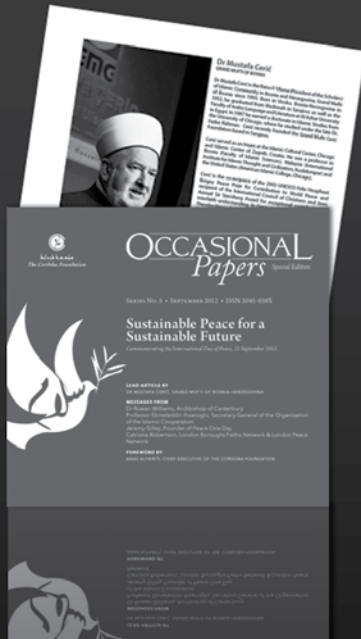


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